

Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Presidential Address

W. Kaye Lamb

Volume 37, Number 1, 1958

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300567ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300567ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Lamb, W. K. (1958). Presidential Address. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 37(1), 1–12.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300567ar>

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

W. KAYE LAMB

Public Archives of Canada

This evening I propose to talk shop. Within a few weeks it will be ten years since I was appointed Dominion Archivist. In this paper, which might well be entitled "Reminiscences of a Ten-Year-Old", I should like to discuss briefly some of the things we have tried to do in the Public Archives of Canada since 1948, to suggest one or two things we may try to do in the future, and finally, to say a word or two about the relations between archivists and historians.

The work of the Archives falls naturally into two parts: our efforts to secure additional historical material, and our efforts to make the collections in our possession known and readily available for purposes of research.

In the perspective of later years I would expect the transformation of the Archives into a full-fledged public record office to take first place in the history of the department in the past decade. This was a project of long standing, for it had been proposed in 1903 and recommended strongly by a Royal Commission in 1914. But no adequate building was provided, and nothing was actually accomplished. Indeed, the Archives building on Sussex Drive was really an impediment, since neither the building nor its site could be expanded sufficiently to provide the great amount of space a record office would require. In my first report as Dominion Archivist I commented upon the problem as follows:

The solution would appear to be the construction of a large half-way house for departmental files, controlled and staffed by the Public Archives, but not necessarily situated in downtown Ottawa. To this depository the departments would be invited to send all records not required for day-to-day use. As long as any reference to files was required, the Archives staff would service and produce the necessary papers on request. When they ceased to be of interest to a department, records would be reviewed by Archives personnel, and those containing material of permanent historic interest would be transferred to the Archives proper. The rest would be destroyed.

In essentials, this is the plan that has since been carried into effect. In January 1956 the Department of Public Works completed and handed over to the Archives a new Records Centre in Tunney's Pasture, Ottawa West. Its size and equipment are commensurate with the purpose it is designed to serve. Each of its five floors is almost an acre in area; the initial order for equipment provided 20 miles of shelving; a second order has since added another 20 miles; the ultimate capacity of the building is 62 miles. In its first two years in operation, the Centre absorbed dormant and dead files that cleared 67,900 square feet of floor space

(more than an acre and a half) in offices, vaults, filing rooms and miscellaneous storage spaces in other buildings in the Ottawa area. In the month of April alone the staff dealt with 3,200 requests for reference service from departments that have sent material to the Centre, and Archives trucks picked up and delivered borrowed files twice a day.

The existence of the Centre is of considerable importance from the point of view of the day-to-day functioning of the Government, since it clears the way for marked improvements and economies in records management. For the historian it is still more important, because it means that older records — the official archives of the future — will for the most part fall automatically into the hands of the Archives as they drop out of departmental use. The selection of material to be retained permanently will then be made by archivists who by training are qualified to take a long-term view, instead of by departmental filing staffs, who cannot be expected to draw a very fine distinction between discarding and housecleaning.

To sum up: The space problem has been solved for some time to come (and, I may add, solved so economically that there will probably be no difficulty in securing a second Records Centre if and when it becomes necessary); the Public Archives is in a position to help departments and agencies with their record problems, and the danger of wholesale destruction of departmental records of long-term value would seem to be definitely a thing of the past.

The second major development of recent years has been the growth of our collection of post-Confederation private political papers. I should be the last person who would wish to disparage in the slightest the magnificent achievements of my predecessor, Sir Arthur Doughty, but I am reminded at this point of an interview I had some years ago with a distinguished European archivist. The subject of the interview was to be the microfilming of historical documents, and kindly members of the great man's staff warned me that I must proceed cautiously and not expect too much. "Remember," they said, "that he is not really interested in anything that has happened since 1450." If we substitute 1867 for 1450, I think the same remark could be made quite fairly about Doughty. He loved the romance and colour of the days of early exploration and colonial wars and colonial rivalries. But no foreign war later than 1815 has really touched Canadian soil, and the prestige of the aristocracy and of titles waned with the coming of responsible government and the gradual decline in the political importance of the office of governor-general. Doughty added to the Archives the finest collection of private papers in existence relating to the Seven Years War, and such key early political collections as the Durham Papers, the Elgin-Grey Papers, and the Macdonald Papers. But after that the programme faltered, perhaps because Confederation still seemed recent to someone born seven years before it took place. Yet Canada as we know it today is largely the

creation of the years since 1867, and an adequate collection of political papers to document the last ninety years is clearly essential if we are to understand the history of this eventful period.

Efforts to fill the gap have met with most gratifying success. Thanks to the interest and generosity of many friends and donors, many important collections of papers have come — and are still coming — to the Public Archives. Most of them consist of original papers; a few collections housed elsewhere are represented by microfilm copies. The papers of the prime ministers are a case in point. In the Archives we now have the papers of every prime minister from Macdonald to Mackenzie King, with the exception of Mr. Bennett, whose papers are in the Bonar Law-Bennett Library at the University of New Brunswick. These prime ministerial collections together total well over 2,000,000 pages, which will indicate the scale upon which political papers have been flowing into the Archives in recent years.

The third major development has been the introduction of microphotography. The Archives acquired its first microfilm cameras in 1950; microfilms are now used for a wide variety of purposes. One of these is to supplement, and eventually to supersede, the great collections of hand-written transcripts that were made over a period of many years, mostly in archival collections in London and Paris. Canadians have long realized that the archives of Great Britain and France contain many documents that are essential to the historians of this country; it is interesting to recall that the first official archival agent of the Canadian Government in Europe was Louis Joseph Papineau, who began copying documents in Paris in 1845. The thousands of volumes of transcripts secured by the Archives in later years added a new dimension to our knowledge of Canada's history, but they had their frailties. Copyists made mistakes (my favourite example is a passage in the Haldimand Papers in which the words "supreme unction" appear in the transcript as "superior suction"); for many years the copyists in Paris were paid by the page, and the rate was so low that they could not afford to spend time on passages that were hard to decipher; most serious of all, the work was so slow and relatively so costly that in many instances only selected documents could be copied. For these and other reasons the transcripts are no longer adequate for purposes of research. Thanks to the generous copying concessions granted by the Public Record Office in London and the Archives Nationales in Paris, we are now securing complete facsimile copies of all the major series of colonial records that relate to Canada. Many of these are of considerable extent. Series C.O. 42, for example, which includes the main exchange of despatches and correspondence between the Colonial Office in London and the Governors of Canada over the period 1763-1902, consists of 891 volumes containing about 450,000 pages.

Both at home and abroad the microfilm camera has enabled us to secure complete facsimile copies of important private papers, the originals of which we could not hope to acquire. The papers of J. W. Dafoe are a case in point in Canada; in Great Britain a great variety of such material has been photographed. The list includes selections from the papers of former governors-general and colonial secretaries, such as the Earl of Minto, the Earl of Carnarvon, and the Earl of Kimberley; papers relating to Canada in the extensive records of the Church Missionary Society and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel; and over 30,000 pages of the accounts and correspondence of Newman, Hunt & Company, and its associated houses, relating to the cod fishery and the maturing of Hunt's celebrated port wine in Newfoundland — a trade that has gone on for centuries. Special mention should be made of the microfilming of the voluminous records of the Hudson's Bay Company for the period 1670-1870 — a project conducted in its early stages jointly by the Company and the Public Archives, but later continued and soon to be completed by the Company alone. Over 1,500 reels of film have now been received in Ottawa, and the correspondence, accounts, post journals, ships' logs and other documents photographed total considerably more than a million pages.

Microfilm has other applications that make it of great value both to the archivist and the historian. It offers a relatively cheap means of making a facsimile copy of essential records, and of providing a safeguard against the loss that would result from damage to or destruction of the original documents. Many of the key files in the Archives are being microfilmed as a precautionary measure, and a good many more will be microfilmed as circumstances permit. Microfilming now plays an important part in the accounting and record keeping of most large corporations; the banks, for example, use it as a simple and compact means of keeping a permanent record of cancelled cheques. It is used quite extensively in the Government service, and its kinship with archives and records management was recognized in 1956, when the administration of the Central Microfilm Unit was transferred to the Public Archives. Departments that require the services of cameras full-time have them on their own premises, but the Central Unit, with its developing and printing equipment and a considerable variety of cameras, is housed in the new Public Archives Records Centre. In the last financial year well over a million feet (that is to say, over 200 miles) of film were processed by the Unit — an abnormally high total, it should be admitted, as in the course of 1957 the Unit microfilmed the record cards of the 1956 census.

Microfilm has also made possible a completely new service by the Archives — the lending of copies of documents and films in the Manuscript Division. An original master negative is never lent, but a positive print made from it can be made available, since it can be duplicated in the event of loss or damage. Positive prints in quantity are quite costly, and

the Archives cannot always afford to duplicate films as soon as they are made or received; but our aim is to have ultimately a complete library of duplicates. Even at present copies of many of the major series of colonial records in London and Paris, and of the papers of such statesmen as Sir Wilfrid Laurier and Sir Robert Borden, can be made available on loan in any library or archival institution from coast to coast.

This brings me to a question that is put, sooner or later, to every institution that has a large collection of valuable historical material on microfilm. The question is this: "If you are willing to lend copies of your films, why are you not willing to sell copies?" So far as official records are concerned, the matter is relatively simple; whether copies are sold or not depends upon government policy. But most would-be purchasers of films have in mind either the documents that have been copied in Europe, or the great mass of private papers that are reproduced on our microfilms. Here the complications are very great, and in many instances the indiscriminate sale of prints would be unfair, if not downright dishonest. The filming concessions granted to us in Paris, for example, include no right to make further copies of whole series of papers, except for our own purposes. The Public Record Office in London expects us to refrain from duplicating microfilms except for other archival institutions that may have a special interest in them; thus our microfilms of the despatches from and to Newfoundland have been duplicated for the new archives collection in Memorial University, St. John's.

Sale of a copy of any papers the use of which is subject to restrictions of any sort is obviously out of the question, for once a film is sold no control can be exercised over its use. And personally I would go further and contend that in many instances the sale of copies of private collections to all and sundry would be a breach of trust and a violation of the clear intentions of many donors. When people give private papers to the Public Archives they usually have in mind that specific institution, and perhaps beyond it the people of this country. They think of their papers as being in the personal care of the Archivist and his staff, and they expect the Archivist to see to it that the gift is safeguarded from unfair and improper use. We are not interested in making a business of supplying prints of our films, and in particular we are not interested in furnishing them on a wholesale scale to institutions that have no special interest in their contents, but are simply seeking large blocks of unexploited raw manuscript material from which students can quarry sufficient unprinted matter to secure a Ph.D. degree.

Our basic concern is with the individual scholar — with the man or woman who comes to us or writes to us because he or she has a genuine interest in and appreciation of what we have in our collections. To these scholars we will give every assistance in our power. We will answer

such questions as we can by mail; we will report upon the extent and character of the source material known to us that relates to a topic; we will lend film copies of relevant material; and in Ottawa we will make all our wares available in a search room open 24 hours a day. These to my mind are the important functions of the Archives, and the activities that justify the expenditure of public money upon its maintenance and development.

Lending microfilms is the newest method by which the Archives is making its collections more readily available; but two other developments have helped to improve our service to scholars. The first is a complete physical reorganization of the contents of the Manuscript Division. Much of the material was formerly arranged alphabetically. The plan had the considerable merit of simplicity, but it failed to bring related materials together. Sir Alexander Mackenzie the explorer, who traced the Mackenzie River to the Arctic in 1789, had little in common except room on the same shelf with the Hon. Alexander Mackenzie, Prime Minister of Canada from 1873 to 1878. Chronology and function are the proper bases for the classification of archival materials, and in 1950 the Archives adopted for its collection of official records the system of classification by Record Groups that had been worked out by the National Archives of the United States. Each group consists of the records of a single department or agency of the Government. Having copied this excellent system from Washington, the Manuscript Division proceeded to extend its basic principles to a broad new field, and to organize its very extensive and varied collection of non-official material into Manuscript Groups — a pioneering venture that has been a great success. Virtually the entire contents of the Division have now been classified in this way. A great amount of detailed sorting and filing remains to be done, but the collections are in good order and far more readily accessible than ever before.

The second means by which the Archives is increasing the availability of its materials is by the publication of a series of inventories, each describing the contents of a Record Group or a Manuscript Group. I am aware that some people look back with somewhat longing eyes upon the bulky series of documentary volumes and calendars printed by the Archives in times past. Perhaps someday we shall see their like again; but at the moment we are concerned with a more pressing problem. The old publications never succeeded in describing more than a fraction of the contents of the manuscript rooms, and they were never able to keep pace with accessions, even before the days of microfilming. What had become essential was a descriptive technique that could be applied rapidly to large bodies of material, and which would enable us to produce, within a reasonable time, a summary account of our entire holdings. This the new inventories will permit us to do. The contents are so arranged as to give the reader some idea of the extent and nature of any particular file, and the period to which it refers. As the circular issued in 1951

with the first of the new inventories stated, the object was to "make it possible for research workers at a distance to ascertain with some precision what papers are preserved in the Public Archives, and to judge with some accuracy whether the department has in its custody significant material relating to any particular topic". Twenty-six inventories have now been published, two more are in the press, and it seems probable that the series can be completed by 1960 or 1961. Revised and enlarged versions of several of the original editions will then be necessary. In addition, we hope to supplement the inventories by compiling a series of subject guides that will bring together all references to a topic regardless of the number of Record or Manuscript Groups through which they may be scattered.

And for the future? We have many projects in mind, of which I may mention two. The first is the assembling of an adequate selection of the records of corporations and institutions. Some steps in this direction have already been taken — relatively small steps, it is true, but not unimportant ones, since they have involved such corporations as the Bank of Montreal and the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railways. Secondly, we must do something about the mass media — the movies; radio; television. At the moment the Archives is cooperating with the Canadian Film Institute in the first tentative advances towards a Film Archives for Canada; it is also exploring the fields of scripts and recordings and kinescopes with the C.B.C. Great and constructive tasks in these new fields lie ahead; I hope it will not be long before we can devote more time and money to them.

I said at the beginning that I proposed to say something about the relations between archivists and historians. To some historians the relationship is a very simple one: archivists are the people who provide them with source material — the miners who laboriously dig out the ore from which historians will smelt their fine gold and silver (to say nothing of baser metals). If the archivist is able to carry his part in the process a step further, and provide concentrates, so much the better. Some historians — especially the better ones — will know that this description is not an exaggeration. One of the best of them greeted me cheerfully when I returned from abroad one autumn with the frank question: "What have you brought home that I can use for my next paper for the Royal Society?"

The archivist has no right to resent this question. After all, he is paid to acquire documents and knowledge about them, and to place both at the disposal of others who are presumably qualified to exploit them. We expect historians to look to us for information and guidance, and we are glad to furnish both to the best of our ability.

I would be remiss at this point if I did not hasten to add that not all historians are merely consumers of archives; a good many help us

constantly in our search for new materials. To cite one example: Dr. C. R. Fay has in recent years unearthed, sometimes in the most unlikely places, many papers relating to the history of Newfoundland and the Gaspé. It has been my privilege to follow in his footsteps with a microfilm camera, and to bring to Ottawa copies of tens of thousands of pages of these records. I hope to follow him once again, camera in hand, in the course of the coming summer, and to photograph documents as far apart as Bath and the Channel Islands.

But the position of the archivist is frequently complicated by circumstances that historians often fail to recognize and understand. Most of these spring from the basic fact that the relationship of a responsible and conscientious archivist to much of the material in his charge is essentially a trusteeship. So far as official records are concerned, the problem is usually quite simple; the archivist makes the material available, or restricts its use, in accordance with rules of access laid down by the department or agency of the Government from which the papers were received. But when private papers are involved, it is quite another matter. Immediate and complete access is what the historian wants; indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that this is what some of them (especially the younger and more impatient ones, and those concerned with contemporary or recent events) simply demand.

In so doing, they overlook two considerations. One is that the fundamental duty of the archivist is to see that papers of historical significance are preserved, and, if possible, placed in the custody of some fully responsible institution in which continuity of care will be assured. *Preservation* is the first and foremost objective; *access* may be — or under the circumstances of the moment may have to be — quite secondary. Many private collections can be secured only on condition that access is restricted, and an archivist would clearly be derelict in his duty if he did not accept the restrictions and secure the papers. If the restrictions are unreasonable or unnecessary, it is usually possible, in the course of time, to have them modified; but until they are modified, the archivist is duty bound to see that they are observed, no matter how irksome they may seem to the historian. I wish to emphasize this point, because it is a matter of prime importance in archives administration. No news seems to travel faster than the glad tidings that someone has secured access to something in spite of official restrictions to the contrary; and nothing can more quickly destroy the confidence of donors and prospective donors of papers to the Archives than an incident of this kind. So far as private papers are concerned, strict observance of the conditions of a deposit is the cornerstone upon which the integrity of the institution rests.

The nature of the restrictions imposed can vary widely. Sometimes they are very simple; the papers of the Rt. Hon. Arthur Meighen, for

example, will not be available until Professor Roger Graham has completed a biography of Mr. Meighen. Occasionally a legal point arises; one collection in our keeping can be seen only under the threat of dire consequences that were outlined to me in a thunderous letter from a Toronto lawyer. In the vast majority of cases, however, use of the papers is simply made subject to the consent of the donor, either for a period of years, or during the donor's lifetime.

If restrictions can be a nuisance, on occasion lack of them can be even more of a responsibility for the archivist. A good many people present papers to the Archives who have little or no knowledge of their contents. Every once in a while we find in these collections items that, in fairness to living people, should not be made available to all and sundry. The dilemma in which this places the archivist will be appreciated.

We have established a rough and ready working rule in the Archives under which we refuse access to any private papers less than 25 years old unless the person wishing to use them satisfies us that they are essential for a legitimate research project. Makeshift and arbitrary though it may be, this rule has worked reasonably well in practice.

Restrictions present a further problem, because in most instances access to restricted collections is granted upon the recommendation of the archivist. This responsibility is not a light one, and it is not made lighter by the somewhat carefree (if not downright irresponsible) way in which a good many people write letters of introduction and recommendation. Indeed, a cynic might well suggest that the more glowing the recommendation, the less the writer probably knows about the person concerned. Yet this is actually a very important matter indeed. The person introduced is frequently a total stranger to the archivist, yet the letter he brings may ask for access to great quantities of private papers for which the archivist is to all intents and purposes the trustee.

I wonder sometimes if historians ever pause to consider what the archivist may think of the use they make of the great stores of source material made available to them in Ottawa and elsewhere. We are all familiar with, and all resigned to, the inevitability of improper use of source materials; we have all seen documents and fragments of documents lifted out of context and arranged in such a way as to present at best an incomplete, and at worst a positively false impression of a person or a period. Fortunately the nature of these concoctions is usually obvious; one can see that they have been assembled to prove a thesis, and they thus tend to defeat their own ends.

Much more subtle and serious is the disappointment caused by an article or book that makes unintelligent or uninformed use of source material that the archivist feels to be of great interest and perhaps even

of great significance. Acquisition of the material may have involved years of patient negotiation, and clumsy use of it can be exasperating in the extreme. This is specially true because a poor study can often destroy the market for a good one for many years to come. Lack of adequate background is perhaps the most common deficiency, especially in studies that relate to other than the contemporary period; one must understand an age before one can write something of value about it. Unwillingness to search out related sources is a second failing; it is fatally easy to yield to the temptation to make do with the documents that happen to be near at hand.

I am going to be so bold as to make one or two suggestions to historians of Canada. The first is that they should consider the great need for brief studies—most of them perhaps little more than research reports—on many of the innumerable smaller problems in Canadian history that remain obscure. Publication may present a difficulty to begin with; at present, if a point cannot be blown up at least to article length, it is apt to languish in someone's memory or notebook. In the course of their research, historians clear up scores of small mysteries in our history every year; what is needed is a means of recording and sharing these discoveries—an historical *Notes and Queries* of some kind which, if properly indexed, would make its contents readily available to anyone interested. Something of the kind might be practicable in the *Canadian Historical Review*, and I commend the idea to its editors.

We must not despise the small point. Real accuracy in Canadian historical writing is rare, and one reason is that no one has time to investigate every detail. Each authoritatively established fact is a permanent contribution; a careful research job, no matter how small, adds to the sum total of available knowledge. I have seen pretentious historical studies which reminded me of mathematical miscalculations, inasmuch as an initial mistake that seemed trifling had, by a process of multiplication, produced a large-scale error in the final result.

My second suggestion relates to Canadian biography. There is a great need for biographical studies of the more interesting and important men and women who people the history of Canada. I have had occasion in the last few years to check the biographical information that is available about hundreds of well-known Canadians, and I found that it was rarely either well authenticated or in the least adequate. The number of biographies of Canadians that are in any real sense definitive can be numbered on the fingers of one hand. There is boundless opportunity here for the inquiring mind and the student of human nature. And I should like once again to enter a plea in favour of the small-scale study. Scores of the people who have aroused my own curiosity are not worth a book-length study, but a 5,000-word chronicle and character impression of each would be invaluable. Carlyle was exaggerating when he declared

that "History is the essence of innumerable biographies", but he had a point. One reason many people find Canadian history dull is that most of the characters that appear in it are mere shadows; we tend as a consequence to know much more about treaties and constitutions than about the men who shaped and made them.

Finally, with appropriate fear and trembling, I should like to suggest to historians that it is of some importance that their writings should be interesting. The typical article in our professional journals and reviews today is essentially a research report, and in my experience the typical historian, glancing through a journal, feels little impulse to read anything unless it happens to fall within his own particular "field" of historical study. Historians, in a word, are writing more and more for an extremely narrow audience. I feel, too, that many historians stop short at the halfway mark in their task of writing history. For history must not merely be written; it must be rewritten. A first version is almost invariably fact-ridden and ungraceful; ease of style and the shedding of unessential detail are the product of revision. Few things are more painful and few are more efficacious than stern and judicious use of the blue pencil. Even novelists have to learn this. I recall a review of a recent novel that characterized the work as "twelve hundred and sixty-six pages of flawlessly sustained tedium"; if cut to half the length it would be a far better book. Leon Edel, in his study of the art of biography, comments upon the "pedestrian but meticulous biographers, who, when they have finished, have merely placed the reader in front of their well-arranged work-table". This is a literary sin that historians commit quite as frequently as biographers do.

Canadian history is full of interesting people and significant problems; I think it is of real importance that this should be made apparent to many others besides historians. And Canadian history also seems to me to be full of by-ways that are interesting and worth writing about. Most of them may not seem to be of any significance in themselves, but I have a private suspicion that if we explore enough by-ways we shall find that we know more about the highways as well.

No one knows better than I the difficulties under which historians of Canada must work. The field is vast; the available sources are all too often both widely scattered and inadequate. Nevertheless our historians have accomplished great things, and we seem, in the last few years, to have entered upon a new period of historical writing. Major biographies have been written or are in the making; new provincial histories are appearing; the first full-scale cooperative history to be attempted in almost fifty years is in preparation. Clearly, there is an upsurge of interest — both professional and popular — in the history of Canada. Indeed, it is precisely because this is so that I am venturing to make these comments and suggestions. I want to see historians, rather than

journalists and novelists, write the history books that will be widely read in Canada. I want to see historians broaden their audience, and in that way carry their important discoveries and conclusions to a wider public, instead of merely to their colleagues and students, as they are apt to do today. A remark of Bertrand Russell's is relevant at this point: "We do not think that poetry should only be read by poets, or that music should be heard only by composers. And, in like manner, history should not be known only to historians."

Careful research and sound scholarship are of course the basic ingredients of good history; but it is all important that to these should be added clarity and style — the two qualities that constitute the last and most difficult mile, which, if left untravelled by the historian, can prevent any work from reaching its proper destination.

These remarks will perhaps have revealed my two basic convictions about Canadian history. One is that it is enormously interesting, even though it is made to appear so far too seldom; the other is that we do not know nearly enough about it. Huge segments of the story have been dealt with only in bare outline; there is hardly a corner of the canvas upon which important details do not remain to be filled in. It is for this reason that I find my work of gathering and safeguarding historical source materials so fascinating and so rewarding. We are building in the Archives a great collection that, barring some catastrophe, will contribute to the greater understanding of this country and its history for many generations to come.

For me personally the career of an archivist has entailed one sacrifice. I was trained as an historian, but acquiring manuscripts for other people to use is such a time-consuming occupation that I have only an occasional moment to spend on historical research myself. My position is somewhat akin to that of the Editor of the *American Historical Review*, who ceased to be a professor of history and a producing scholar in order to serve his fellow historians through the *Review*. Like Dr. Shafer "I have learned again . . . how demanding scholarship, the pursuit of knowledge, really is". And like him "I have learned, too, that to assist in the pursuit may be in itself a productive adventure".