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THE FEDERAL ARCHIVAL SCENE

W. KAYE LAMB

Public Archives of Canada

To survey the whole of the federal archival scene would take much more time than is available this morning. I propose therefore to deal chiefly with the Manuscript Division of the Public Archives, and to outline the recent developments there which I think will be of most interest to Canadian historians. Specifically, the points I have in mind are the following: The reorganization of the manuscript collections; the preparation of a series of preliminary inventories describing the collections; expansion of the Division's holdings of official records of the Government of Canada; acquisition of an important group of post-Confederation political papers, and, finally, the extensive use of microfilm.

The old arrangement of manuscripts on the shelves served several generations of scholars long and faithfully, but the growth of the collections made a change essential. The old system leaned heavily on the alphabet, which has the advantage of simplicity, but plays havoc with that basic essential of the archivist, chronology. The example of this which springs to my mind is the papers of the two Alexander Mackenzies. The alphabet brought together the papers of a fur trader who explored the Mackenzie River in 1789, and those of the politician who became prime minister of Canada in 1872. Obviously the two have little in common. The papers of Mackenzie the explorer should be with the papers of his colleagues in the fur trade; the prime minister's letter-books belong in a collection of post-Confederation political papers. In other words, manuscripts should be so arranged as to bring together documents of the same period and common provenance.

The Manuscript Division decided finally to adopt, with some important modifications, the "Group" system of arrangement which was developed by the National Archives of the United States. All official records in our custody have been divided into "Record Groups", each of which consists of the records of some convenient unit of the Government. In many instances the unit is a department, or a major branch of a large department; in others it is an executive office, such as that of the Governor General. When arranging records within an individual Record Group the Division has been careful to remember that thousands of footnotes in hundreds of printed volumes, some published many years ago, cite references to manuscript sources in the Public Archives. Unnecessary changes have been avoided, and provided a citation was adequate and correct in the first instance, no difficulty should be experienced in finding the document to which it refers. The famous "G" series, for example, is now included in Record Group 7, but no change of consequence has been made within the "G" series itself.

Unlike the Archives in Washington, the Public Archives, in addition to official records, has in its possession a very large collection of private papers, transcripts, photostats and microfilms. This material we have arranged in what we call "Manuscript Groups". The Public Archives seems to be the first institution in which this plan has been adopted on any scale. It has worked out very well in practice. Each Manuscript Group consists of essentially similar material relating to a given period. Manuscript Group 19, for example, is made up of documents, or copies of documents, relating to exploration, the fur trade and the Indians in the period 1763-1867. Here Sir Alexander Mackenzie's papers have found a logical place alongside those of Simon Fraser, David Thompson, and a hundred other traders and explorers of his time. Other Manuscript Groups consist of transcripts and microfilm copies of records relating to Canada which are preserved in some other depository. Thus Group 1 consists of copies of documents in the Archives des Colonies in Paris, while Group 11 consists of copies of Colonial Office papers in the Public Record Office, in London. The 431 volumes of transcripts which make up the famous "Q" series now form part of Manuscript Group 11, but the series itself has been left quite undisturbed.

It may matter little to scholars how records are arranged on the shelves, but the point was of major importance to the Manuscript Division for two reasons. First, the Public Archives expects soon to have accommodation available which will allow it to function as a full-fledged public record office. This means that the Archives must be prepared to receive and organize very large quantities of departmental records. A shelf arrangement capable of rapid and almost unlimited expansion was therefore essential, and the Record Group system has the required flexibility. The second reason for the rearrangement stems from the fact that the Archives is a national institution seeking to serve scholars in a country of great physical extent. The average Canadian historian works hundred of miles from Ottawa, and adequate catalogues of the documents in the Manuscript Division would be of great service to him. Having arranged its material in convenient and logical groups, the Division has undertaken the very considerable task of preparing preliminary inventories of everything in its keeping. This project may surprise those who are familiar with the innumerable lists, guides and calendars that the department has printed in its annual reports or as separate publications over a long period of years. The difficulty is that these aids to research are scattered through many volumes, some of which are now out of print, and that in spite of their number they cover only a part of the collections in the Archives. What is required is a concise, consistent description of everything available, so arranged as to give the reader some idea of the extent and nature of any particular file, and of the period to which it refers. As explained in the circular announcement issued with the first of the new inventories, the object is 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."

The first of the new inventories was published in the autumn of 1951. It described the documents comprising Record Group 10, which consists of all records of the Indian Affairs Branch and its predecessors which have been transferred to the Public Archives. The text proper is preceded by an introduction in which the history of the administration of Indian affairs in Canada is briefly summarized, and followed by an appendix listing past and present senior administrative officers of the Branch. With minor variations, all the Record Group inventories are expected to follow this general pattern. To date seven inventories — five devoted to Record Groups and two to Manuscript Groups — have been published. Three more are in the press, another two are almost ready for the printer, and others are in preparation. It is not yet possible to say definitely how many inventories will be required to complete the series, but the total will probably be about forty. Comments would seem to indicate that the first titles are as helpful as we hoped they would be.

I said a moment ago that the Public Archives expects soon to be able to function as a full-fledged public record office. This idea is not new. It was clearly in the minds of a committee which, fifty years ago, drafted an order-in-council directing that public papers should be "assembled in one place and put into the custody of one person, and so arranged and classified as to be easily accessible to all persons interested therein." The Royal Commission appointed in 1912 "to inquire into the state of the Records of the Public Departments of the Dominion" recommended that a public record office should be brought into being, and that the archives building should be enlarged to accommodate the great volume of material that should be transferred to it. After a long delay due to the Great War 1914-18 the Archives building was finally enlarged in 1925-26, but it was still far too small to serve the purpose that the Royal Commission had in view.

Space has always been the basic difficulty, but this should be solved within the next two years. An Archives Records Building, to be erected near the new home of the Bureau of Statistics, at Tunney's Pasture, should be completed by the spring of 1955. To this building the various departments of Government will be invited to send all records not required for day-to-day use. Here they will be fumigated, cleaned, catalogued and shelved. Quite as important, they will be serviced by the staff of the Public Archives, and will be made available whenever required either by departmental officials or by scholars entitled to have access to them. I should like to place particular emphasis upon this point, because some people have misunderstood the nature and function of the new Records Building. It will not be a dead storage centre, where papers will lie in dismal piles or moulder in dusty boxes, beyond the reach of the historian. The plan includes adequate search rooms and all necessary research facilities. Inevitably it will take some time to sort and file the great quantities of old records which will come to us, some of them in a state of great disorder, from basements and attics all over Ottawa. But the objective of the Public Archives is and always has been a fully-serviced records centre, which can play its part in both a records management programme and an orderly Archives programme for the Government of Canada.

Some idea of the physical extent of the public records problem, and of the new Records Building may be of interest. A survey completed in the summer of 1952 indicated that the records then in the custody of the various departments of the Government occupied about 458,000 square feet of floor space, or about ten and a half acres. Approximately half of these, occupying about five acres, were classified as "dead" or "dormant" from the point of view of the department. Many of the latter would have been screened out and destroyed long ago if sorting facilities had been available. Certainly only a fraction of the total will be found to have any long-term or archival value when they are transferred to Tunney's Pasture and examined there. This being so, it appeared that working space and stackroom space totalling about four acres should make the new Records Building adequate for a considerable time to come, and that is the scale upon which it has been planned. Lest you should think that we have been too modest in our estimate, I hasten to add that the stackroom space provided will be the largest in Canada.

I have been asked why a separate Records Building is being erected, instead of an addition to the Public Archives Building on Sussex Street. This is a complicated question, and I can mention only two of the several factors involved. The first is a matter of dollars and cents. The cost of a building which would match the style of the Archives would be very much greater than the cost of one matching the new Bureau of Statistics. The second relates to the site. The Royal Canadian Mint, next door to the existing building, now covers the whole of the site available to it. Someday it will have to expand, and the only direction in which expansion will be practicable will be southward, upon the plot of land now occupied by the Archives. In the long-term view the Department of Public Works has therefore earmarked the Archives property for the Mint, and it is naturally reluctant to place any other new permanent structures upon it.

Careful thought has been given to the types of material which will be housed in each of the two buildings. We plan to retain in Sussex Street all pre-Confederation official records, and a number of key official files from the post-Confederation period, such as the records of the Governor General's Office and the Privy Council. All private papers and non-official material, including transcripts and microfilms from abroad, will also be retained. The Records Building will be devoted primarily to departmental files later in date than 1867. Experience suggests that this division will reduce to very small proportions the inconvenience to research workers which will result from having records in two buildings, some distance from one another.

I should like next to refer to the special effort being made by the Archives to acquire an adequate collection of records and private papers relating to the post-Confederation period. The years since Confederation are now of major interest to research workers, and unless the Archives acquires adequate collections, it will fail to serve scholars as effectively as it did formerly. The collection and preservation of documents must, indeed, be a continuous process if the needs of the present and the future are to be met properly.

Our efforts to collect key post-Confederation files have met with gratifying success. So far as official records are concerned, the most important transfers were made in 1950. In the course of that year the Privy Council Office and the Department of External Affairs sent to the Archives many of their own early documents, and many papers which were originally in the Governor-General's Office. Lack of space has made it necessary to limit accessions of departmental files to the most useful and important items offered, but the new Records Building should enable the Archives to acquire and screen all post-Confederation departmental records which are no longer required for day-to-day office use.

We have been equally fortunate with regard to private papers. In the last four years the Archives has received the papers of Sir John Abbott, Sir John Thompson, Sir Robert Borden and Mr. Arthur Meighen. Within the same period the portion of Sir Wilfrid Laurier's papers which remained in private hands was presented to the department; and the literary executors of Mr. Mackenzie King have let it be known that, in accordance with Mr. King's own wish, his very extensive files will eventually come to the Archives. The department is now in the very happy position of being able to announce that, with the exception of the R. B. Bennett Papers, which have been given to the University of New Brunswick Library, it seems assured of possession of the major portion of the papers of every prime minister of Canada since Confederation.

These important files have been supplemented by the papers of many other prominent Canadians, and persons connected in one way or another with the history and development of this country. Governors-General, Senators, Leaders of the Opposition, Cabinet Ministers, Chief Justices, High Commissioners, soldiers, farmers and business men are all included in the list. All these papers have come to the Archives by gift, and in sum total they represent a major contribution towards the task of adequately documenting the history of Canada during the last half century and more. There are still many interesting and important items we would like to add to the list, but the corner has been turned. For one thing, it is now fairly widely known that the Archives is definitely interested in important papers, no matter how recent in date they may be, and gifts are beginning to flow in of their own accord.

The last topic I have time to touch upon is the use of microfilm. I am well aware that few people like to use microfilm, but this is largely because they are usually faced with poor films and poor equipment. We have found by experience that the making of microfilms and the use of them is a complicated business; but we have also learned that the end result can be highly satisfactory. Documents must be arranged and catalogued with great care before they are microfilmed; the photography must be first-rate in quality; and the film must be viewed on a good reader. More and more of our films are meeting these standards, and of late more than one scholar has gone so far as to volunteer the opinion that our film copies were easier to use than the original documents, and could be consulted with little or no eye strain.

Microfilming has now almost entirely replaced hand copying in the London and Paris branches of the Public Archives. Thanks to the courtesy and cooperation of the officials in the Public Record Office we now have a camera of our own operating there, and we hope to complete arrangements for the installation of a second camera before long. Our objective in London is nothing less than a complete facsimile of all the major files in the Record Office that relate to Canada. This may seem to be an ambitious plan, but it can be carried out within a relatively brief period, and, considering the magnitude of the end in view, at very reasonable cost. Twice within our lifetime the contents of the Record Office have been in grave danger, and our films will offer a safeguard against the irreparable loss which would result from damage to or destruction of the original papers. Incidentally, every click of our camera serves this same purpose for the Public Record Office itself, as well as for ourselves.

At the moment the camera is engaged in photographing series C.O. 42, which from our point of view is probably the most important single file in the Record Office. Most of the documents in it are included in the well-known "Q" series of transcripts, and it may be well to explain why these papers are being copied a second time. The transcripts were made many years ago, and the copyists were not permitted to transcribe anything except the actual text of the documents. The marginal notes and comments added by Colonial Office staff and officials, which are frequently invaluable to scholars, had therefore to be omitted. These notes should be available to scholars in Canada, and the microfilm version will bring to this country an important body of new material. Moreover, the "Q" series extends only to 1841, whereas series C.O. 42 continues on well into the present century. Our present intention is to photograph the series immediately as far as 1867, thereby making available in Canada for the first time facsimiles of the 185 volumes of papers relating to the years 1841 to 1866. Later we shall photograph a further 230 volumes, covering the period 1867 to 1902.

It is sometimes possible to borrow papers of Canadian interest, and several important collections have been taken to the Public Record Office and microfilmed there. For example, the National Library of Scotland very kindly sent the Edward Ellice Papers to London for filming, and by so doing enabled us to acquire facsimiles of this most interesting collection. A number of church and missionary societies, including the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, have assisted us in a similar way.

In Paris the story is substantially the same, except that the filming must be done by the commercial concern which controls microfilming in the Archives Nationales. The Ministry which controls the Archives des Colonies has extended very special and unusual privileges to us, and we are securing complete facsimiles of the most important papers relating to New France. Several parts of the great "C" series have already been photographed, and work on the "B" series is progressing steadily.

Mention should also be made of the microfilming of the Archives of the Hudson's Bay Company, in London. This great project was

undertaken jointly by the Company and the Public Archives in accordance with an agreement concluded between us in October, 1950. Over 650 reels of film, consisting of facsimiles of over 450,000 pages, have already been received in Ottawa. The microfilming should be completed within the next year, and by the end of 1954 the Archives should have in its possession copies of the entire surviving papers of the Company for the two centuries from 1670 to 1870. These papers contain material of great importance to research workers in many fields, and Canadian scholars are greatly indebted to the Hudson's Bay Company for its generosity in allowing the Public Archives to secure a positive copy of its films.

In Ottawa microfilming is used for a considerable variety of purposes. Many of the key files in the Archives — the "G" series, for example — are being microfilmed as a precautionary measure. Important papers are sometimes given to us on condition that they are microfilmed, and a print made available to some person or institution. Thus a positive microfilm of the Laurier Papers will go to Queen's University when this collection is photographed. Then again, the camera is frequently used to microfilm papers which we can borrow, but which we cannot hope to acquire. The Dafoe Papers are in Ottawa at this moment on loan, and are being photographed. Incidentally Mr. Victor Sifton, who very kindly made the Dafoe Papers available to us, will receive a print of the film, and this print will enable him to make the text of the collection available to students in Winnipeg without wear and tear to the original documents.

I have been asked a number of times whether the Archives proposes to sell copies of its microfilms of important collections. This may appear to be a simple matter of policy, but in actual fact it is a highly complex question, involving all sorts of unexpected factors. To cite two of these, by way of example: All microfilms made in the Public Record Office in London are subject to a Crown Copyright; conditions are frequently attached to gifts of papers received by the Archives. One must never lose sight of the basic fact that the role of an archivist is essentially that of a trustee. More than once I have been given papers by people who knew nothing about their contents and were obviously quite ignorant of their implications. They simply trusted me to do the right thing by them and their documents, and the complete loss of control over material which the sale of microfilm copies entails makes the exercise of such a trusteeship impossible. The answer lies, I think, in the creation of a loan collection of positive prints which can be made available to any scholar anywhere in the country, provided he is prepared to observe any regulations which may govern the use of the original documents or the master microfilms in Ottawa.

And now I must stop. I should have liked to say something about the use which is being made of microfilm in the Government service; I suspect that you would find the scale upon which it is being employed a little staggering. When I left Ottawa one project under consideration was expected to run to 125,000,000 exposures. I should have liked to say something about the Public Records Com-

mittee, upon which the Canadian Historical Association is represented by two members, and which controls both microfilming and the destruction of Government records which are found to be of no archival value. And I should like to emphasize once again that I have really talked about only one Division of the Public Archives. Nothing has been said about the Map Division, which has doubled in size in the last few years, and now possesses what we believe to be the best study collection of 16th century maps on this continent relating to Canada. The Picture Division has likewise been passed over in silence. But I trust that enough has been said to suggest that the federal archival scene is a lively one, full of activity and of future promise for the Canadian historian.

DISCUSSION

THE PRESIDENT outlined the functions of the Public Records Committee and the work of the Association's representatives on the Committee, Mr. Brown and M. Lefebvre. MR. SOWARD paid tribute to Dr. Lamb's co-operation with historical research workers. The problem of British ownership of many documents now in Canadian institutions and the hardship following from a United Kingdom ruling refusing access to documents later than 1902 were discussed. It was hoped that something might be done in this connection and that Canada would continue the wiser policy of avoiding such specific "cut off" dates. MR. PRESTON pointed out that neither Dr. Lamb nor Dr. Ireland had touched upon the subject of municipal records, which were preserved (in Ontario for instance) by provincial ruling. Yet these records were often in poor condition. He cited those of the city of Kingston. Local historical societies might be encouraged to go into the question. MR. WAITE instanced the destruction of forty-five years of files by a newspaper, without prior consultation with any historical body, and felt that this class of source material should be preserved. The discussion ended with a motion by MR. LOWER seconded by MR. TALMAN that the Association set up an Archives Committee. A temporary committee was named under the chairmanship of Mr. Spragge.