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THE PROVINCIAL ARCHIVAL SCENE

Willard E. Ireland

Archives of British Columbia

I

Nearly a decade has passed since the Canadian Historical Association last discussed, formally and at any length, the problem of public and historical records preservation in Canada¹. The stimulus for that occasion had been provided by the publication in the March, 1944 issue of the *Canadian Historical Review* of a statement on the general archival situation prepared by Dr. George W. Brown. Let me recall the main theme of his analysis:

The problem of public and historical records in Canada is a pressing one, but it is one of those pressing problems which can be disregarded — even when persistent neglect becomes a detriment to the national interest. While it is true that there are encouraging exceptions in certain provinces, the general situation with regard to historical records in Canada is a lamentable, and even disgraceful, one . . . the writer is prepared to stand by his general statement that the situation as a whole is deplorable, that in some respects it is scandalous, and that it is contrary to the public interest, since history as Howe so eloquently made clear, must be allowed to play its part if we have any sound conception of the national development.²

The time is, perhaps, now opportune for another quick survey of the provincial archival scene, particularly since, on the national level, the subject fell within the purview of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences³ and resulted in some definite recommendations. Several of these specifically interest and involve the provincial counterparts of the Public Archives of Canada. Moreover, in the intervening years there have been developments in the provincial level that are significant. Unfortunately it cannot yet be claimed that the strictures made in 1944 are no longer valid. It can be held, however, that the "encouraging exceptions in certain provinces" noted a decade ago have been extended and strengthened and that thereby the situation has been improved to a considerable degree.

Before going on to a brief survey of recent developments in the various provinces, it must be pointed out that definite information is not easily procured. Judging by the absence of printed annual reports provincial archivists have been highly unsuccessful in securing due recognition of their work. Two exceptions, however, must be

¹"The Discussion of the Problem of Public and Historical Records in Canada," (*Annual Report of the Canadian Historical Association, 1944*) 40-45.

²George W. Brown, "The Problem of Public and Historical Records in Canada," (*Canadian Historical Review, XXV, March, 1944*) 1.

³*Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949-1951*, (Ottawa, 1951), 111-112, 335-345. Unfortunately the special study prepared by C. P. Stacey, "Canadian Archives," in *Royal Commission Studies: A selection of essays prepared for the Royal Commission of National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences*, (Ottawa, 1951), 231-248 dealt only with the federal and not with the provincial archival scene.

noted, those of the provinces of Saskatchewan and Quebec. The fact that only one article descriptive either of the holdings or the functions of a provincial archives has been published since 1944 (and that appeared as recently as this year) is perhaps symptomatic of the archives problem generally. How can public support be enlisted for any expanded archival programme when the general public, to say nothing of the specialist, is kept in a state of ignorance, not only about archival operations and problems, but almost about the very existence of these institutions?

II

Now for a quick survey of recent developments province by province.⁴

NEWFOUNDLAND

At the moment the preservation and care of Newfoundland archives are the responsibility of the Department of Provincial Affairs. They consist wholly of state and official documents publications, etc., and do not embrace private papers. No microfilming of records has yet been undertaken although the matter is under consideration. There is no designated provincial archivist.

By statute, in 1951, a "Board of Trustees of Public Records of Newfoundland" was created, originally with five but now with twelve trustees nominated by the Lieutenant-Governor in Council. The definition of "public record" is extremely broad and includes "all books, papers, records, documents, structures, erections, monuments, objects, materials, articles or things of historic, artistic, scientific, or traditional interest". It will be seen that it is thereby empowered to fulfill many of the functions more normally assigned to a museum or to an Historic Sites Commission. The Lieutenant-Governor in Council may transfer to the custody of the Board any public record.⁵ Since this Board is only now getting down to work no reports of its activities are as yet available.

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

No formal provision exists for the maintenance of a provincial archives although there has been an effort made to preserve a good deal of the material housed in the Provincial Building in Charlottetown. Under the supervision of the Director of Prince Edward Island Libraries there is a position designated as "assistant archivist."

NOVA SCOTIA

As early as 1857, by the appointment of a Records Commission and of a Records Commissioner, Nova Scotia recognized the necessity

⁴The writer wishes to acknowledge the courtesy of provincial archivists and those responsible for the preservation of archival material in providing information on the situation in their respective provinces. On points of fact it is hoped that a fair presentation has been made, on matters of opinion the writer hastens to exonerate his *confrères* from responsibility.

⁵Newfoundland *Statutes*, 1951, c. 68, "Public Records Act, 1951."

of preserving its public records. The Public Archives of Nova Scotia was established by statute in 1929 with the administration vested in a Board of Trustees. Through private beneficence a building was provided which is now supported by public funds. The institution has the active cooperation of the Nova Scotia Historical Society. The Archives is not confined solely to the preservation of public records of government but does acquire records of general historic significance and has museum as well as library functions to perform. Micro-photography of early newspapers and of older documentary material is now being undertaken. While the emphasis may be said to fall within the pre-Confederation period the problem of the transfer of non-current government records is ever-present. Personnel and space are also major problems.

NEW BRUNSWICK

At the present time there does not appear to be any organized Archives in New Brunswick nor any provision for the transfer of non-active government records. By the terms of the "New Brunswick Museum Act" it would appear that the Museum at Saint John has permission to become the Archives of the province. It has acquired, particularly through the Library of the New Brunswick Historical Society, much material that might be construed as being more of archival than of museum interest. The Library of the University of New Brunswick maintains an Archives Branch which is attempting to preserve material relating to the province as a whole and not solely the university, but it has no trained archivist in charge. A recent survey of *Library Service in New Brunswick* recommended that "An Archives Division of the Legislative Library be established under the direction of a competent archivist." In dealing with this problem generally the survey offered the following comment:

An Archives Division of the Legislative Library might profitably be established. Under a competent person this division could not only arrange and make available for use the vast quantities of documents and archival material in the Library but could study the holdings of the Universities and the Museum and develop a co-ordinated program of acquisition. The lack of such a program not only makes it difficult to locate books or documents but allows much material of historical value to be lost or sent out of the Province.⁸

QUEBEC

Le Bureau des Archives de la province de Québec was established in 1920 under the jurisdiction of the Provincial Secretary and since 1931 has been housed in the Provincial Museum.⁷ The wealth of material contained in this collection need not here be described, for through the annual *Rapport de l'Archiviste, le Bulletin des Recherches Historiques*, and its *Inventaires*, much has been done to organize and publicize its holdings, which provide the nation with some of its oldest and most precious records. Within certain chronological limits it is

⁸Peter Grossman, *Library Service in New Brunswick: a report and recommendations*, (Fredericton, 1953), 32.

⁷Antoine Roy, "Le Bureau des Archives de la Province de Québec," (*Culture*, II, mars, 1941) 77-80.

beyond doubt one of the best organized archives in the country. It has not confined its activity solely to official records but has also acquired private papers and inventories of the material held by other institutions within the province. It also embraces an excellent library including not only printed material, but also maps, paintings, and photographs of great historical significance. It perhaps would not be unfair to state that the emphasis has been along genealogical and antiquarian lines and the writer is not in a position to say how adequately provision has been made for the preservation and acquisition of post-Ancien Régime and post-Confederation documents.

ONTARIO

The Ontario Bureau of Archives was established in 1903 and elevated to the rank of a department in 1923. For purposes of administration it was placed under the Minister of Education in 1935. It is now housed in a new building on Queen's Park provided through the cooperation of a public-spirited private donor and the provincial government. The Archives, under its act, has a dual responsibility both for preserving and cataloguing records of government "within twenty years from the date on which they cease to be in current use"⁹ and for collecting all documents bearing upon the political and social history of Ontario. At present, the policy is to stress the use of the Archives as a Government Record Office, while still continuing to seek historical manuscript collections. Several important manuscripts have been acquired recently from the University of Toronto Library. Many government departments have been co-operative in the transfer of their records. It has recently been decided to follow the practice of the Public Archives of Canada, in producing inventories of collections, rather than calendars, thus making a knowledge of holdings available to students much more quickly. The acquisition of printed material is restricted to those items which it is thought would be of use to those doing research on the history of Ontario. The Archives have both a photostat and microfilm camera, and a laminator for the repair and preservation of documents. A recent interesting undertaking has been the circulation of exhibits of manuscripts through the secondary schools of the province.

MANITOBA

The development of a provincial archives is relatively new in Manitoba. For years the brunt of the responsibility for the preservation of the historical records of the province was assumed by the Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba, which with meagre funds and no permanent staff did yeoman service. Acquisitions over the years became a part of the Legislative Library, or more correctly, of the Librarian's office. For years this official had evinced a keen interest in and a wise awareness of the need for action that was until recently frustrated by the absence of tangible government support. In 1947 an archivist was appointed on a part-time basis, and steps were taken

⁹D. F. McOuat, "Our Provincial Archives," (*Ontario History*, XLV, Winter, 1953) 31-36.

to cope with current acquisition. In July 1952 a full-time archivist was appointed, and for the first time there is now emerging a unified collection. It is hoped that the Legislative Library Act will shortly be amended to provide for the establishment of an Archives Branch with the necessary correlation of its activities with the Library and historical societies. Under the circumstances at the moment cataloguing of this material is only getting under way. Limited attempts have been made to deal with the problem of public records, and legislation is projected which will make it possible to establish a programme of public records administration with provision for schedules for the retention and disposal of departmental records. As might be expected problems of staff and space are serious considerations. At present the programme does not include municipal, court or school district records, although their significance is recognized. Equipment for microphotography has been secured and the filming programme will include not only newspapers, but also departmental records.

SASKATCHEWAN

No other province has achieved as much in so short a period of time as has the Saskatchewan Archives, which was only established by provincial legislation in 1945. The Act, which is an excellent one, provides for a Saskatchewan Archives Board with government and university representation thereon. The Act also provides for the transfer of departmental records to the Archives. This procedure has operated to the satisfaction of all parties concerned. As this survey must be limited those wishing more detail should refer to the *Reports of the Saskatchewan Archives*, the fifth of which, covering the years 1950-52, is now available. Owing to the fact that Saskatchewan, as a province, is of relatively recent origin, the problem of the bulk of documentation is not as serious as that faced by other provinces. In common with the other prairie provinces, however, there is the added complication that much of the early documentation is held by federal departments of government. An active policy of acquisition of non-government material has been embarked upon and microphotography is being utilized to the full. Nor is the collection confined only to documentary material; newspapers, books and photographs are also being acquired. Local circumstances dictated a division of depositories between Regina and Saskatoon which to many might appear to be unsatisfactory, but which, in practice, has worked out satisfactorily. One of its major accomplishments has been the publication since 1948 of *Saskatchewan History*.

ALBERTA

Although Alberta has a regularly constituted "Bureau of Archives" to preserve "all that may still be had of the early records and unwritten history of this section of Canada, as well as to preserve all records of current history in the Province," it must, unfortunately, be reported that little progress has been made in the organization of an effective institution. Hampered by the lack of an appropriation, no staff has been provided to undertake the necessary work of col-

lecting and organizing an Archives nor does there appear to be any clearly defined policy of acquisition either by way of transfer of departmental records or of private papers. There is, however, the nucleus of a collection which if given adequate financial support and qualified personnel might eventually evolve into a true provincial archives.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

The archives of British Columbia dates from the reorganization of the Legislative Library in 1893, although the institution was not given official recognition until 1908, and even today operates without benefit of an Act.⁹ It is however well established and has for years received substantial financial support making possible the employment of an adequate trained staff. In addition to documentary records, it possesses one of the finest libraries of Northwest Americana on the continent and an extensive photographic collection. Its policy of acquisition is broad, including private papers, for the purchase of which adequate funds are available. Its holding of official records of the colonial period is excellent, and latterly more attention has been given to the matter of provincial public records. The "Public Documents Disposal Act," which provides for an obligatory ten year period of retention, has been strengthened by recent amendments which give the Provincial Archivist considerable power in the matter of transfer to the Archives or outright destruction. Further amendments are now under consideration. In 1951 the Provincial Archivist was charged with the responsibility of instituting a Central Microfilm Bureau which has complete charge of microphotography of all departmental records. Its activity necessarily involves the filming of current records which by virtue of bulk and use present immediate storage problems, as well as the filming of records of more permanent historical significance. The activity of this Bureau is closely integrated with the role of the Archives as a Public Record office. In addition to its publication of the *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* in cooperation with the British Columbia Historical Association, the Archives has its own *Memoir Series*. Recently it has embarked upon the preparation of the *British Columbia Heritage Series* for the Department of Education. Two series are underway, "Our Native Peoples" and "Our Pioneers". Designed as informational aids to the teachers these printed brochures are illustrated and are accompanied by filmstrips based on material in the Archives for class-room use.

III

A few comments arising from this general and necessarily fragmentary survey may be in order. It is perfectly patent that the provincial archives are at various levels of advancement and that the interpretation given the word "archives" and consequently the function of the institution, shows considerable variation. Some are striving to

⁹W. E. Ireland, "The Provincial Archives of British Columbia," (*Culture*, II, mars, 1941) 80-81.

achieve the status of a Public Records Office purely and simply; others are seeking to become depositories of historical data in the broadest sense of the term. Some are striving to cope with the increasingly serious problem of non-current government records at the provincial level; only a few are trying to bear in mind the equally important and pressing problem of records at the municipal level. Despite variations in achievement the writer feels that there is now more reason for optimism in the provincial scene than there was a decade ago.

It cannot, however, be too strongly urged that all archives are faced with tremendous difficulties in the matter of adequate physical accommodation, and that most are seriously in need of additional trained personnel. While microphotography is not the complete nor perfect answer to the first problem, it is, however, being used with discretion and efficacy in many institutions. In the matter of personnel the report of the Massey Commission at least hinted at the possibility of the Public Archives of Canada assisting in this respect. If that institution can give assistance in training personnel in archival procedures and techniques further advances can be anticipated. At the moment the training given by the American University at Washington, D. C., is the only professional course available on this continent. Valuable as it is, it does not wholly meet Canadian needs. In the first place it is primarily concerned with problems of record management which are not entirely similar to those to be found in the Canadian provinces; and in the second place it does not take into consideration the fact that, by and large, we in Canada do not have the long-established and well-supported State Historical Societies, distinct from State Archives, to identify and husband source material for State history.

In the main it can be said that the relationship between the various provincial archives and with the Public Archives of Canada is a happy one. There necessarily is, and presumably always will be an area of overlapping interests, since provincial political figures have the habit of becoming national figures, and occasionally *vice versa*. It is doubtful if any serious rivalry in acquisition exists, and in any event microphotography provides an answer. If the material is available in microfilm the place of deposit of the originals is a matter of lesser significance insofar as the scholar or research worker is concerned. At the moment a broader sharing of resources is the vogue, to the mutual advantage of all institutions. We are, however, desperately in need of more information about the existing holdings of institutions, and also as to the whereabouts of material still in private hands. The suggestion that a national survey of historic records be carried out is a most promising one. The provincial scene will, in all probability, profit by any development on the national level and any device likely to foster the one will strengthen the other. It is conceivable that a full-scale round table conference of provincial archives and the Public Archives of Canada to discuss not so much policies of acquisition but of techniques of administration would be most useful. In this way some degree of uniformity of standards in such matters as catalogues, inventories, calendars, indexes, and the like, might be achieved. Far from being discouraging, the provincial scene, is to use a trite expression, challenging.

DISCUSSION

MR. SPRAGGE indicated that the situation of the Ontario Archives was somewhat improved beyond the condition indicated in the paper. The new building (shared by the Art Gallery of the Royal Ontario Museum), the microfilming camera and readers, the laminator and photostat equipment were all positive gains. The laminator, he believed, was the only one available in any archives in Canada. There was an embarrassment of riches in the bulk of material from government departments and from the University of Toronto. The procedure for transferring government documents to the Archives was still under study, but was increasingly satisfactory. There was still a shortage of trained staff, and the problem of space for expansion of storage facilities had not been solved. MR. FERGUSON had little fault to find with the account of the Nova Scotia Archives presented in the papers. The Archives included a museum and art gallery and extensive collections of newspapers and maps. Two series of publications were issued and both had reached nine issues. A new scheme for microfilming deteriorating newspapers was being launched. MR. SAGE felt that help might be given in two or three of the cases mentioned in the paper. Newfoundland had a big problem and much could be done in New Brunswick. Alberta hardly required any financial assistance. He thought that there should be a general "get-together" of archives people under the sponsorship of the Canadian Historical Association. MESSRS. ROTHNEY and WAITE gave a brief account of Newfoundland's resources in archival material and pointed out that Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick had alternative institutions which served as repositories of material in the absence of formal archives. MR. STANLEY referred to the work of the late Dr. J. C. Webster in collecting documentary and historical material relating to New Brunswick which is now housed in the New Brunswick Museum at Saint John. MESSRS. LOWER and TALMAN discussed the problem of policy in dealing with both official and private papers. Canada appeared to have something of both the American and British usages, but there was no single uniform policy followed by the Canadian provinces.