

## The Postmodern conversation in Archives – a preliminary reflection

What do archivists do? Conventionally, and sometimes by rote, we say that as archivists we collect, appraise, arrange, describe, conserve, and make available records and collections of lasting value. Each of these functions involves intellectual effort and is buttressed by a growing body of archival theory and the published results of our practice. Archival functions are carried out within a theoretical framework of two overarching concepts provenance and original order. That means that an archivist is never to obscure the place that a set of records had come from and also as far as possible is to leave the physical arrangement that the author or authors intended. Both of these principles assume that archives are part of the physical world order, are “real”.

Each of archival function is applied in order to bring the resulting archive to you the potential or actual researcher. We exercise our professional judgment within a legal, evidential, and administrative context. The context of this effort can be simple, the home economics of a pioneer ranch or complex, the highly bureaucratized head office of a multinational corporation whose branch office is on Sixth Avenue SW.

Conventional theory, whether liberal or neo-Marxist, channeled our self-examination and our explanations of the nature of our practice and focused on the context of the creator of the records. Some of our most active archival scholars Terry Cook, Tom Nesmith, Bernadine Dodge and Heather MacNeill have begun an intensive exploration in the published literature of what Postmodernism can offer to archival theory and practice. Postmodernism challenges us to see our work multi-dimensionally: not just from the centre (the stuff of history) but more importantly from the margins, from the point of view of the lost, the discarded, the erased; and most importantly to make our individual intellectual contribution and even our mistakes available to the judgment of current and future archivists and scholars.

Archives used to be a fairly predictable place to work. We had a limited number of archival fonds or collections that were our turf. We made connections with individual authors, playwrights, composers, priests, or their surrogates, the executive directors of their representative agencies. Even in a government agency we could schedule acquisitions, negotiating with fellow bureaucrats. In the 1960's we had a fair amount of freedom to design finding aids, to support the properly accredited academics who were our preferred clients and to consign the genealogists, who paid the bills with their taxes and photocopy charges, to margins of our reading rooms. Except when there was a centennial celebration our sponsors rarely consulted us.

In the 1970's the occasional voluntary agency or corporation, in Canada usually one of the big five banks, would establish an archives program and hire a few of us. Mostly we worked for universities, religious societies and the various levels of government. In Canada we established ourselves as a separate profession from the academic historians with our own national and provincial associations and Archivaria, our own journal. To

be honest some of us felt a little guilty about this move away from our “Learneds” roots. But in the main we were secure in the knowledge that we dealt with the real if somewhat fragmentary stuff and had the power to dispose of the junk and that our efforts would be rewarded by our clients in the prefaces to their works. This, to some extent, is still our mindset as archivists.

We were and are not totally naïve. We knew that there were gaps in the record. While we had been through a period of unprecedented growth, archives were funded at levels significantly below the resources assigned to libraries and museums. A former archivist of Ontario told me that he had counted 4,000 voluntary agencies that were not represented anywhere in the holdings of Ontario’s heritage centres. In the 1980’s I participated in a North American wide project to raise interest in a scientifically designed documentation strategy effort. Canadian professional associations in cooperation with the National Archives began the work that led to the formation of the Canadian Council of Archives and the formation and adoption of the Canadian Rules for Archival Description.

Each of these initiatives was designed and supported financially in a clearly liberal and rationalist way. We used a modest amount of government help both financial and in kind, a major amount of voluntary effort and our brains to work out a creative solution to cooperating across two languages, 10 provinces and 2 now 3 territories, to include both the public and the private sectors and to give a preferential option to the smaller and developing archives. The “program adjustments” i.e. downsizing of the 1990’s added stress but did not destroy the trajectory of the efforts. Indeed this was the time that Canadian archival accomplishments received international recognition particularly at the International Council of Archives meetings in Beijing in 1996. But the era of the data set and the advent of large scale use in government of networked personal computers have posed set of archival problems that invite our theorists to explore the possibilities for renewal that postmodernism offers.

The postmodernist solution poses many challenges. The greatest is that we still live and work in a community and governmental structure which defines itself, despite the stresses of high capitalism and constant war as liberal and rationalist and assigns value including resources to manage archives according that system. Indeed Michael Ignatieff among others argues that we are in the grip of “Empire Lite”, the apogee of the liberal state. I would also conclude that while postmodernist theory can describe new contextual ties it has yet to articulate a method by which we can assure the authenticity of the archive in any format because all formats are impacted by our daily use of the computer.