Coming Full Circle?: Aboriginal Archives in B.C. in Canadian and International Perspective

By
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This thesis examines the past, present and future development and nature of Aboriginal archives and archiving in British Columbia, set in Canadian and international perspective. The thesis focuses on Aboriginal archives in BC because the higher number of First Nations there than elsewhere in Canada makes it one of the most prominent and important areas of Aboriginal archiving in the country. The thesis begins with an introduction to the holistic ways in which Aboriginal people in Canada traditionally recorded, preserved, and communicated knowledge and history over time, and thus the methods by which they “archived” up to the mid-twentieth century, in contrast to and compared with Euro-Canadian traditions of archiving. It then goes on to explore the various forces that directly and indirectly disrupted the processes by which Aboriginal culture and knowledge, and thus memory and identity, were transmitted from one generation to the next. As a result of these forces, and the inevitable intertwining of Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian cultures and worldviews, Aboriginal people increasingly found themselves having to access Euro-Canadian archives or establish their own along similar lines. In BC, where historically very few treaties were signed, the documentation created in the context of land claims and treaty negotiations in particular meant that such records were couched in occidental rather than Aboriginal people’s own cultural terms and thus demanded corresponding storage and use methods. Thus, the thesis suggests that such new approaches to Aboriginal archives and archiving were a “reactionary” or defensive response to legal, political, and social requirements and forces, rather than simply as a basis for communication and recording a traditionally “holistic” sense of culture, memory, and identity. And, as will be seen, this reactionary response was not limited to BC, but would reveal itself concurrently in the rest of Canada, and in other colonised countries such as Australia and the United States. With the results of a questionnaire responded to in Australia, Canada, and the U.S., the thesis then presents comparative national and international approaches to, experiences with, and views on Aboriginal archives and archiving. With these explorations in hand, the thesis concludes with the suggestion that Aboriginal archiving is now coming full circle, returning to its holistic roots, having been positively influenced by the power inherent in the reactionary approach, but also newly challenged with varying issues. At the same time, Aboriginal archiving has challenged and contributed to a redefinition of traditional, Euro-Canadian notions of archiving, and thus pushed the boundaries of archiving as we know it.