

Research in Archival Studies Takes a New Look at Archives

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Archives, such as the Archives of Manitoba and its famed Hudson's Bay Company Archives, or Library and Archives Canada (our national archives), hold immense volumes of information that have long been used for academic and other purposes. But archives themselves as a subject of study, rather than only as sources of information for other subjects, has a much more recent history. This new perspective has emerged as archivists and others have begun to realize the dramatic power of society's archiving actions over what can be known. The question of how archivists and others shape knowledge through communication and archiving, and how students should be educated to be professional archivists in light of that, has guided my research and teaching as the director of the Archival Studies master's program in the Department of History. (Students receive a master's degree for completion of the program. They work as archivists across Canada.)

Almost all of us in our daily work and personal lives create over time enormous amounts of letters, memos, photographs, diaries, and other records in various media that together document a vast array of people, places, activities, and

experiences. This is one of the most important human activities, given the extraordinary time and resources devoted to it and our complete dependence on communication to shape and understand our world. The resulting records are the purview of archives. Far more even than publications, this documentation forms society's most extensive body of information, and presents one of its most difficult but little understood intellectual challenges. How is society's archives (a small portion of all these documentary materials, but one that is always growing and still vast overall) to be created from them? What part of the whole is to be retained indefinitely as archives, and the rest excluded, and even deliberately and legitimately destroyed? According to what criteria? Set and applied by whom? Where exactly is that archival part? How do we find that out? How do its various parts relate to the whole? How can it be represented best in surrogate descriptions of this mass of information in order to make it accessible? How do we arrive at its messages and meanings so that it can be made useful to all comers, now and even hundreds of years from now? What should not be made accessible and why? For how long, and on whose authority? Can the laws of nature be thwarted and

it be preserved indefinitely, particularly in its now especially fragile digital forms? How can we actually preserve it? How are practical programs to be created, funded, and managed to implement these various decisions effectively? And how does this conventional documentary view of archives relate these materials to other valuable sources of knowledge: publications in libraries; museum artifacts; art works in galleries; historic buildings and sites; and the archives of oral traditions, landscapes, objects, memories, and rituals of Aboriginal communities especially?

Our answers to these questions, and the decisions made by archivists in response to them, affect greatly what can be known about our world. My research, and the extensive student thesis research I have supervised, try to reconceptualize archives as places where such knowledge is shaped through these key decisions about its fate, meaning, and identity, rather than merely stored inertly as seemingly aging esoterica on those stereotypically 'dusty' shelves.

Conventional understandings of archives reinforce that latter misleading view of them. The standard dictionary definition, for example, invariably describes them simply as places that house certain records. Indeed, archivists themselves have often similarly defined them, and argued that their role is mainly to keep or protect the records, transcribe certain information from them that unproblematically 'describes' them, and, equally straightforwardly, retrieve them when requested. Although archives are places for keeping and retrieving records, this language, if not highly qualified, obscures our understanding of archives more than illuminates it, and in so doing itself warps and limits the knowledge we can gain from archives. These ideas reflect the view that archives have no significant impact on the knowledge creation process. Archives are simply

-- there -- and seemingly neutral in their effects.

I have suggested in my research a very different view. I see the records in archives and the work done by archivists with them as ever changing mediations of reality, or communications media and processes that continually shape and reshape profoundly what we can know as they evolve over time through new understandings of them, generated by archivists and others. In a series of articles in recent years I have suggested how our understanding of records and the work archivists do might be recast in this way.

My current interest within this broader project is to take this a step further by exploring more specifically the extraordinary new uses of historical information in archives -- from human rights protection and pursuit of social justice (such as in the Residential Schools issue) to medical (genetics), scientific (climatology), and economic purposes (urban redevelopment and tourism), as well as new historical, other academic, and cultural purposes, from filmmaking to novel and play writing. I am examining how archives can be created and organized and the records in them understood in order to maximize such benefits to society. Archives would thus always be opening anew to meet changing human needs. I presented some recent work on this subject as a keynote speaker in August 2010 at the Brazilian Congress on Archival Science in Santos, Brazil.

The formation, organization, accessibility, and rules controlling society's largest body of still largely untapped information -- its archives -- deeply affect societal self-understanding and well being. Exploring this vital human activity and educating my students to engage it wisely and competently at its heart, as archivists, are my primary research and teaching interests. 🏰

For the titles of student theses and publications, my publications, and those of adjunct professor in Archival Studies, Terry Cook, see the Archival Studies Program section of the Department of History web site: <http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/history/archives/index.html>

The Library Looks to the Future

Georgina Lewis



The Father Harold Drake Library has entered a period of renovation and renewal. After many years of having to focus on damage from water and high humidity, the Library is now turning its attention to upgrading its facilities.

This past spring, as part of a system-wide project funded by Libraries' administration, the FHD Library walls and skylight area were painted. This was the first time since the Library was built that the bare concrete walls received a coat of paint. The warm terracotta colour has covered many of the stains left over the years by water leaking down the walls and enhanced the work and study environment. The work on the skylight over the garden area was one of the most complex phases of the entire Libraries' painting project as it required the erection of scaffolding and testing for asbestos. In spite of the complication, the work was completed without major disruptions for users. Students and faculty returning in September were delighted by the change.

The Fr. Harold Drake Library is looking forward to installing a new reference/circulation desk. The current raised counter has been a busy crossroad for many patrons and books since the Library

opened, and in this time there has been a shift in reference /circulation service. Staff now spend more time with individual users and less on processing books and journals. They are also required to work for extended periods at computers as they input or gather data for any number of library projects.

Plans for the new desk combine the traditional elevated counter for circulation work with "sit-down" workspace for tasks that require long periods of computer work or consultation with patrons. Some of the unique features of the lowered section include a space for face-to-face seating for clients and staff and a rounded conference table. Ergonomic principles have been incorporated into all aspects of the design for the new desk.

The project has progressed beyond a sketch on paper. Funding, provided jointly by the St. Paul's College Library Endowment fund and the University Libraries, is in place. The Libraries has also purchased two new ergonomic work chairs. The countertop, trim and millwork colours have been selected. Tenders for the electrical and millwork will be submitted soon. Moving forward! 🏰