Memento Mori: An Archival Strategy for Documenting Mortality on the Canadian Frontier at Red Lake, Ontario, before 1950

By

John Richthammer

*Memento Mori*, Latin for “remember thy death,” implores us to be mindful that death is both inevitable and inescapable. What of the records created during the process of dying and about death? Based upon wide-ranging archival research into primary documents, this thesis explores the rich sources of both official, public records, and personal, private ones, relating to mortality on the small-town Canadian frontier before 1950. The community of Red Lake, Ontario, which was established on the frontier as the result of the Red Lake gold rush of 1926, is the subject of a case study.

Rather than merely cataloguing the sources, this thesis illustrates that by adapting aspects from such archival appraisal methodologies as macroappraisal and documentation strategy, one is able to make available to researchers a wider range of sources relevant to the themes of dying and death. Specifically, by employing a documentation strategy methodology to identify and illuminate the records of human activities surrounding the functions of dying and death, archivists can offer to researchers the opportunity to locate relevant records wherever they may physically be. Since this is an Archival Studies thesis, it does not provide an historical analysis of dying and death, but is an archival study of the types of records related to the theme of mortality on the Canadian frontier: how those records were created, their character, and their capture and preservation in a small community.

This thesis is organized into three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One explores some relevant trends in the secondary literature of three fields: archival appraisal and description, small town or local development on the frontier, and dying and death as human activities. Chapter Two sets the context in which the thesis analyzes mortality on the frontier by outlining the relevant history of the Red Lake District of Northwestern Ontario and its pioneers. The focus is especially on the gold-mining boom years from the mid-1920s until shortly after the Second World War. The heart of the thesis, Chapter Three, is a case study of the various records creators, human activities, and resultant records related to mortality. It is organized according to three phases or functional categories surrounding dying, death, and memorialization. The conclusion summarizes the usefulness of the case study, in light of the literature review on Chapter One. It also suggests areas of further research, including aspects not covered herein, of records of dying and death on the Canadian frontier.

The documentation strategy, adapted from the original methods employed by archivists Helen Samuels and Richard Cox, was found to work best when deployed as a research and descriptive tool for exploring and documenting the records of mortality, more so than its original purpose as an acquisition tool. The strategy has wide-ranging usefulness discovering and then describing a “virtual” documentation universe relating to record-generating human functions and activities.