From the Canadian Library Association to the Canadian Federation of Library Associations: A Confluence of Evolution and Circumstance
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Article abstract

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Abstract

This paper explores the history of the Canadian Library Association (CLA-ACB), from its inception in 1946 to its disbanding in 2016. While the CLA-ACB is not without accomplishments, especially in the areas of lobbying and advocacy, the association's financial instability and challenges encountered in meeting member expectations ultimately led to its dissolution. Extensive consultation with the library community confirmed the continued need for a national library voice, best achieved through a new model, a federation of library associations.

Keywords

library associations; Canadian Library Association; CLA-ACB; Canadian Federation of Library Associations; CFLA

Introduction

It is not often that a national association makes the decision to dissolve. In the case of the Canadian Library Association, this decision was made not only for practical financial reasons but also for fundamental philosophical reasons. Members repeatedly told the association that it was not meeting their professional needs. Attendance at annual conferences was declining. It was also apparent that provincial and regional library associations were increasingly popular and becoming the associations of choice for library professionals.

Early Canadian Library Association

June 1946 could be considered the birth date of the Canadian Library Association in Hamilton, Ontario. A small, dedicated group of librarians came together to approve a constitution that would shape a national association reflective of Canadian values. Historically, librarians from Canada had participated in the American Library Association (ALA), regularly attending annual conferences and taking part in ALA activities. Also, provincial associations such as the Ontario Library Association and the Maritime Library Association were seen to meet the professional development needs within their respective regions.

Prior to 1946, there was much conversation and several attempts were made to create a uniquely Canadian association, with the ALA conference serving as the gathering place for Canadian librarians to meet and seek consensus on how a national association could uniquely represent Canadian culture and interests. The Canadian Library Council, known as CLC, was formed in 1936, but had little impact in furthering the goal of creating a formal national association. A second Canadian Library Council, also known as CLC, was formed in 1941. From this CLC came the momentum to craft what became the Canadian Library Association – Association canadienne des bibliothèques (CLA-ACB).

An excellent background to many of the activities and accomplishments of the early CLA-ACB can be found in Elizabeth Hulse's book, *The Morton Years* (1995). The initial CLA-ACB years laid the foundation for what would form key pillars of a national association.

Foundation of Service to the Community and Profession

It is easy to see how many of the early CLA-ACB activities emanated from the 1946 goals approved in Hamilton. These goals were "to develop…. library standards…. library placement…. library exchanges…. inter-library loans of professional information…. encouragement of the compiling of Canadian reference books…. [and] support efforts to promote library training." (Canadian Library Association, 1961, p. 101).

Advocacy, publishing and professional development greatly enhanced the Canadian library community. A review of two decades (1960–1980) of CLA-ACB journals, *Feliciter* and *Canadian Library Journal*, as well as many conference proceedings, resulted in an impressive list of initiatives. To name a few:

- Brief to Royal Commission on Publications, 1960
- Public Library Standards Committee, 1962–1964
- University Library Standards Committee, 1962–1964
- Training of Library Technicians Committee, 1965–1967, 1968
- National Conference on Library Statistics, 1973–1974
- Task Force on Prison Libraries, 1974
- Committee on Education of Library Personnel – Professional and Continuing Education, 1974–1976

- The Future Role of and Priorities of the National Library of Canada: A Brief to the National Librarian of Canada, 1977
- Brief to Special Joint Committee on the Constitution of Canada, 1978
- Library and Information Needs of Native People Committee, 1978–1979
- Guidelines on Academic Status for University Librarians, 1979

It would be useful to be able to report in more detail about the Terms of Reference and results of some of the above initiatives. Unfortunately, the CLA-ACB did not publish final reports for many of its activities. Reference was made to documents distributed at annual conferences or during council meetings, but the actual text was not included in any of the sources consulted. Upon the dissolution of the CLA-ACB, Library and Archives Canada became the recipient of all main office documentation excepting financial documentation, which went instead to the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) office.

Over the years there were several CLA-ACB publications of note. The *Canadian Periodical Index* was used by many as the authoritative source for identifying Canadian information. *Feliciter* and *Canadian Library Journal* were among the few places that library-related news and scholarly publishing could be found. Members of the library community voiced much disappointment when the *Canadian Periodical Index* was sold and *Canadian Library Journal* was discontinued in 1991—both actions a direct result of fiscal difficulties within the CLA-ACB.

Recurring Challenges

There has been much discussion in the library community about the strengths and failings of the CLA-ACB. In my 40 years as a member of the CLA-ACB—during which I frequently served on committees, was an executive member of a division and occupied a term as President of the CLA-ACB—I regularly heard from individuals (both members and non-members) that the CLA-ACB did not reflect their professional interests. There was consistent support for a national association, but little indication of how this could successfully be accomplished.

Discontent regarding the ability of the CLA-ACB to represent the diverse Canadian library communities (from young professionals to French-Canadian library workers to various interest groups) and meet their needs was expressed by many parties throughout the lifespan of the association. Recent graduates said CLA-ACB membership and conference attendance was too expensive. Stuart-Stubbs (1968) eloquently stated that the CLA-ACB did not represent French-Canadian librarianship and should declare itself as uniquely representing English libraries, asserting that the CLA-ACB "promise[d] nothing but a bilingual name" (p. 17).

In 1976, CARL pulled out of the CLA-ACB, stating that "the 26 institutions that make up CARL found many incompatibilities with the Canadian Association of College and University Libraries (CACUL), of which they were a member" (Berry, p. 1595). This was a significant blow to the CLA-ACB, as CARL represented a large proportion of

institutional members. Fortunately, some members chose to remain, Dalhousie University being one of them.

From 1965 onward, there was much change within the structure of the CLA-ACB Council. Four divisions representing library types were established in 1968–69 to ensure representation within communities of interest. In 1971, it was recommended by the ad hoc Committee on Structure that Library Trustees be included as a fifth division. Also, regional and provincial associations—provided they were institutional members—could appoint representatives to sit on the council (Canadian Library Association [CLA-ACB], p. 3).

Marshall (1968–69) spoke at length about the challenges and possibilities facing the CLA-ACB. Suggestions were made regarding composition and term of office of the CLA-ACB Council, frequency and location of conferences, joint initiatives with other national associations and attracting younger members by giving them opportunities to participate in the CLA-ACB. A comment made by Marshall (1968–69) resonated as much in 2015 as it did then:

> We must also recognize that there is a new mood among young professionals. They are not only eager to participate, they are not prepared to wait. They are challenging the whole idea that grey hairs must run the world – and why should they run the library associations. (pp. 14–15)

In response to the recurring challenges and continuing discontent of library professionals, the CLA-ACB struck a Presidential Commission on Organization (CLAPCO) in 1985. Their report, released in March 1987, included 91 recommendations that covered three broad categories: organizational structure; conferences; and communications (Canadian Library Association Presidential Commission on Organization [CLAPCO], 1987, p. 1). The first recommendation affirmed the association's important role in "seeking to influence government policies and programs, federally and provincially" (CLAPCO, 1987, p. 2). Provincial, territorial and regional library associations became part of the governing body of the CLA-ACB, as proposed by Recommendation 36. It was also recommended "that the desirability and feasibility of a federation of Canadian library associations be thoroughly explored" (CLAPCO, 1987, p. 4). In a 1989 article by Horrocks, it is reported that one of the more significant recommendations from the CLAPCO report was "to move CLA from a bicameral (Board and Council) organization to a unicameral one (Executive Council)" (p. 63).

A national survey in 1995 again affirmed a desire to support a national association, but stressed that benefits and opportunities needed to be clearly communicated (Millard, 1995).

Writing the Future, a report issued by the CLA-ACB soon after the turn of the last century, argued that the association was seen as reactive and not proactive while spending a disproportionate amount of time on internal "housekeeping" matters (2001, pp. 1–2). Advocacy and lobbying needed to be priorities. It was recommended that all policy documents and marketing initiatives appear in both English and French. *Writing*

the Future provided context that allowed the CLA-ACB to be better distinguished from regional associations in Canada, despite overlapping membership bases and similar overarching goals (Skrzeszewski, 2001, pp. 60–61).

Lack of membership and lack of services to members were recurring themes throughout the existence of CLA-ACB. Declining individual memberships also had an immediate impact on revenue, especially for institutional members, who were consequently charged higher membership fees. There was much discussion on how to attract and retain members. At a meeting of Council and Board on November 18–20, 1985, it was determined that the most critical issue facing the CLA-ACB was the loss of membership, primarily through dissatisfaction with the CLA-ACB(Canadian Library Association, 1985). In 1986, a report entitled *A Membership Development Strategy for the Canadian Library Association* was produced, containing a series of recommendations and an action plan for shoring up membership decline. The recommendations included that "the CLA take steps to work more closely, cooperatively and cost-effectively with its divisions and provincial and other library associations" (Press & Icely, 1986, p. 52).

Perhaps President Marnie Swanson (1991) said it best:

> Over the years, we have studied ourselves to distraction, and each time we get the same message from members: that is, CLA should provide an effective advocacy and lobbying program; improved communication with and between members; a strengthened image of libraries and librarians; timely and accessible programming; and closer ties between all groups within the association and individual members (p. 237).

Governance of the CLA-ACB was an area of frequent change. As noted previously, five CLA-ACB divisions were established in the late 1960s. Individuals frequently joined the CLA-ACB in order to participate in these divisions as they were perceived to most appropriately reflect their communities of interest. At the 2011 Annual General Meeting, a motion to amend the constitution was passed, effectively dissolving divisions and creating interest groups. It is my belief that this was one of the most important factors that led to the demise of the CLA-ACB.

Despite repeated efforts to attract and retain members and to incorporate a governance model that reflected the desires of its actual and potential members, the CLA-ACB struggled and never quite achieved success.

Time for Change

Financial challenges plagued the CLA-ACB for decades and resulted in significant limitations in its capacity to meet the needs of library professionals. Indeed, John Archer, Chairman of the Budget and Finance Committee, aptly summarized the problem of insufficient funding to run the association when posing the following question during discussion of the budget presentation at the 1963 annual general meeting: "[a]re we not trying to run a $100,000 operation on a $45,000 budget?" (CLA-ACB, p. 190). Over a decade later, Brian Land raised similar concerns in his Presidential Address at the Annual General Meeting: "financial problems that were once intermittent and irritating

have now become both persistent and critical for our Association." (CLA-ACB, 1976, p. 4).

The challenges of accurately predicting annual conference revenues significantly affected the CLA-ACB's ability to balance its budget. While a great deal of thought and effort was put into developing affordable conferences in attractive locations with programming that appeal to many, success was variable. Variables that impacted the success of conferences include the cost of the conferences (which were often not affordable for students and new professionals, as noted earlier), the accessibility and popularity of the location of the conference, and the partnerships between the CLA-ACB and the regional or provincial associations "hosting" the conferences. The data in Table 1 reflects the variance in the CLA-ACB's income over a 50-year period. For the most part, profits or losses can be attributed to the level of success of the annual conferences.

Table 1

CLA-ACB Financial Overview (1957–2016)

Year	Revenue	Expenses	Net income (Loss)	Source
1957–58	$ 33,048	$ 32,424	$ 624	CLA Board Council Minutes
1959–60	34,448	35,516	(1,068)	CLA Board Council Minutes
1968–69	117,258	103,600	13,658	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations
1973–74	742,813	747,411	(4,598)	CLA Board Council Minutes
1974–75	837,613	904,838	(67,225)	CLA Board Council Minutes
1975–76	841,025	984,301	(143,276)	CLA Board Council Minutes
1976–77	786,575	904,741	(118,166)	CLA Board Council Minutes
1979–80	1,101,000	1,094,870	6,130	Proposed budget, from CLA Board Council Minutes
1982–83	1,525,895	1,502,360	23,534	CLA Board Council Minutes
1984–85	1,827,652	1,792,813	34,839	CLA Board Council Minutes
1988	3,956,211	3,994,377	(38,166)	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations
1989	1,108,512	875,855	232,657	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations
1994	1,910,297	1,882,349	27,948	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations
1995	1,961,849	1,909,269	52,580	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations
2002	2,083,139	2,039,153	43,986	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations
2003	1,696,149	1,793,629	(97,480)	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations
2009	1,414,806	1,382,130	32,676	(Teskey, 2010, p. 89)
2014	1,541,168	1,554,419	(13,251)	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations
2015	1,302,212	1,813,558	(511,346)	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations
2016	$ 251,096	$ 568,999	$ (317,903)	CLA annual report, Statement of Operations

While it would have been useful to also provide an overview of historical membership trends as they too impacted the CLA-ACB's budget, such data were not readily available. While membership numbers were regularly presented to the attendees of the

Annual General Meetings, unfortunately, they were not included in CLA-ACB annual reports. It is ironic that within a profession of information managers, we have not put more rigor into consistently providing public documentation on something as fundamental as membership numbers. Anecdotally, however, it can be said that variations in membership numbers as well as a reluctance by members to have fees increased contributed to a precarious financial bottom line.

The CLA-ACB's spotty financial track record was a known challenge. Indeed, in 2001, then-Treasurer Kathryn Arbuckle expressed her concern for the fiscal viability of the CLA-ACB, publishing two articles in *Feliciter* on the need to change how the association ran its operation. Despite this motivation for change, the CLA-ACB was not able to adjust its financial model sufficiently to survive.

Regardless of the challenges faced, the CLA-ACB did make important contributions to the library profession during its lifespan. Advocacy and lobbying are two areas where the CLA-ACB has been very successful. For instance, the CLA-ACB's briefs to the Canadian government on changes to copyright legislation and maintenance of the book rate have served the library community well. Moreover, the CLA-ACB's participation in the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions and the World Intellectual Property Organization provided a forum for uniquely Canadian concerns as well as contributions on the international stage. While it is wonderful that these initiatives were successful, it was also true that the hard work of the CLA-ACB often benefited many who were not members of the association.

The rising popularity of regional and provincial library associations among potential CLA-ACB members was also a reality with which the CLA-ACB had to contend. The relative affordability, perceived increased relevance and networking benefits of local associations were often more attractive to library professionals seeking a professional community. Local associations also brought the benefit of easier access to participation in governance or on committees. Finally, the creation of the [Partnership](#) demonstrated how a grassroots federation of associations could effectively provide benefits to a broad community at little extra cost to the community. The Partnership presented a model of strong collaboration that resulted in many wide-reaching gains for the library community, including a nation-wide job board, a highly successful online continuing education program and an open source, peer-reviewed professional journal.

The dire financial condition of the CLA-ACB became apparent to me—first as Vice President and then as President of the association. The Board had many sobering discussions on what could be done to turn the CLA-ACB around. *The Future Now* (2014) report affirmed the precarious state of the CLA-ACB (Royal Society of Canada, p. 57). The report noted that at the time of publication, there were over 115 library and archival associations; some national in scope, many in specialized fields and many representing regions or provinces, resulting in the emergence of "[a] cacophony of perspectives and debilitating competition" (Royal Society of Canada, 2014, p. 57). Perhaps echoing the success of the Partnership, Recommendation 11 of the panel advised that the "CLA reconceive itself as a federation of national provincial/territorial and other national associations…." (p. 59).

From CLA to CFLA

In the fall of 2014, the CLA-ACB made the difficult decision to explore what could be the structure of a new model for a national association. CLA-ACB President Sandra Singh undertook the responsibility of crafting a concept paper that would outline what a federation of library associations could look like as well as the benefits of such a model. This concept paper went to the library community of not just CLA-ACB members, but also members from the various regional, territorial and provincial library associations. At the Ottawa 2015 conference, there was much discussion on the proposed model and Executive Council was tasked with continuing to refine the model, as well as continuing the dialog with the library community. The working group—composed of members from provincial, territorial and national associations—met extensively over an 11-month period. On January 27, 2016, at a Special General Meeting of CLA-ACB members, the vote to disband the Association was passed. Peet (2016) noted that "[r]eactions to CLA's disbanding and the proposed federation have ranged from optimism tinged with regret to outright disappointment and accusation of mismanagement" (p. 14). Thus, the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) was created.

Conclusion

How would I sum up the confluence of evolution and circumstance that led to the dissolution of the CLA-ACB and creation of the CFLA? Membership was declining and efforts to demonstrate value in belonging to the CLA-ACB were unsuccessful. It was increasingly apparent that the financial sustainability of the CLA-ACB was dire. The decision to dissolve an association with 60 years of success and challenges was not made lightly or with ease. I believe it was the right thing to do in order to move on to a more viable model such as the CFLA.

To date, CFLA has adopted many of the position statements of the former CLA-ACB: they have managed a fiscally conservative association, put much effort into ensuring the mandate of advancing library excellence in Canada, championed library values and the value of libraries and influenced national and international policy impacting libraries and their communities. (CLA-ACB, 2015, p. 3). I am optimistic/hopeful that the CFLA will draw on the experiences, challenges and successes of the CLA-ACB as it faces familiar or new hurdles in maintaining and cultivating the Canadian library community.

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