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The Discussion of the Problem of Public and Historical Records in Canada

Archives Committee

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THE DISCUSSION OF THE PROBLEM OF PUBLIC AND HISTORICAL RECORDS IN CANADA

By the ARCHIVES COMMITTEE

THE afternoon session on Thursday, June 1, was devoted entirely to a discussion of the problem of public archives in Canada. This discussion was based upon an article written by Professor George W. Brown, which appeared in the number of March, 1944, of the *Canadian Historical Review*, and which is entitled, "The Problem of Public and Historical Records in Canada."

In opening the discussion, Professor Brown stated that the present situation with respect to the preservation and use of historical records and like material is most regrettable. First of all we must get a comprehensive idea of the present situation; then we must find some way of providing a stimulus to further development and constructive action. In pursuance of the initial objective the meeting was presented with a series of reports upon the present condition of federal and provincial archives. Great stress was laid in the discussion upon the importance of distinguishing between Public Records and other historical or archival materials, and the serious results of the failure of governments to look after their own Public Records were emphasized.

Major Gustave Lanctot, Dominion Archivist, pointed out that the Public Archives of Canada are still governed by the Act of 1912 under which Public Records *may be* transferred to the Archives. However, after the present Archives Building was erected to receive these Public Records, only two or three departments ever sent any records. The policy of the Public Archives in collecting and displaying such material as historical pictures, medals, etc., had aroused some criticism, and tended to create an impression that Public Records were not the primary concern of the Archives. The great increase of departmental records after the last war created a difficulty with the result that a new building, having no connection with the Public Archives, was put up in 1937 and departments which wished to store records there were given space to do so. This means, in general, that Public Records antedating 1867 are deposited at the Public Archives; those for the later period are in some cases placed in the Storage Record Building which, as its name implies, is no more than a storage place. Consultation of the records in this Storage Record Building is very difficult, the materials held there not being properly classified. At present this building has been taken over for war purposes.

Since the outbreak of war, Major Lanctot has proposed the creation of a War and Public Archives Commission whose prime aim would be the proper classification of Public Records. This proposal has not been implemented. Hence the Public Archives has limited its work during the last four years to classifying the records it now holds, and to completing the calendaring already begun. This work is well advanced.

As a post-war programme, Major Lanctot proposed that the Public Archives make a survey of all public and private archives in Canada for the purpose of constructing a substantial catalogue of such materials which

would make them easily available for general use. A start on this plan is being made with the Archives of the Séminaire de Québec. The findings would be published at government expense, and would constitute one part of the government's rehabilitation programme.

For British Columbia, the Librarian of the University of British Columbia, Dr. Kaye Lamb, made the report. He stated that this province has had an archives since 1908. Although there is no provincial Archives Act, the department is now well established on a sound basis. It is housed in the Provincial Library, with which it is closely interrelated. It contains a very valuable collection of historical materials in good condition, but cannot be regarded at present as a full-fledged Public Record office, as there are no regulations in effect requiring the government departments to forward their non-current files to the Archives. Some departments have transferred their records with some regularity, others have not. One department has destroyed almost everything. At present, destruction of Public Records is permitted only with the approval of the Printing Committee of the Legislature, the meetings of which the Provincial Librarian is privileged to attend. This checks wholesale destruction, but the arrangement is not entirely satisfactory, and it is hoped that legislation to modify it will be passed.

With regard to Alberta, Professor M. H. Long of the University of Alberta pointed out that, after a period of neglect of historical records, with consequent irreparable losses, there has been some awakening to their value, and it is possible that steps may now be taken for their collection, organization, and preservation. The most important collection of historical material is at present that of the Legislative Library which contains standard sets of printed Public Records; a very respectable collection of Canadiana dealing largely with the West and the North; a good many newspaper files, often incomplete; and the beginnings of pamphlet and manuscript collections. There is no provincial Hansard, the records of debates in the legislature being preserved only in the form of clippings from leading newspapers which are dated, pasted into scrapbooks, and indexed. There has been a good deal of confusion, lack of proper space and care in the treatment of the various materials but under the present Librarian, Mrs. Gostick, the situation has shown improvement. At least foundations exist upon which to build. Nuclei of a provincial museum exist, and such an institution would have been established had the outbreak of war not prevented it. The provincial government has been confronted increasingly with the problem of inactive departmental files and has recently appointed a committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Robert Newton, President of the University, to study and report upon the best methods of "recording, preserving and handling public documents, records of historical value to the Province, and allied matters relating thereto." It is hoped that the activities of this committee will lead in due course to the establishment of a Public Records Office and Archives for the province.

For Saskatchewan Professor G. W. Simpson of the University of Saskatchewan gave a report on the Public Records of that province prepared by Professor A. S. Morton, Provincial Archivist. Professor Morton declared that whereas in the past Saskatchewan had been very careless of

its Public Records, at present a satisfactory policy for such records had been initiated. The peculiarity of the problem in this province was that the Public Records were in Regina, while the ability and willingness to care for them were in the University at Saskatoon. The government decided, largely through the efforts of the Hon. J. W. Estey, then Minister of Education and Attorney-General, to solve the problem by creating a subdivision of the Archives under the shadow of the University where the organization, the study, and the use of the documents would be more intense and permanent. It was decided to follow the practice of the British government and to draw a sharp distinction between Public Records, i.e., authentic documents never out of possession of the government, and historical documents which have been in the possession of private individuals and which perhaps have passed from hand to hand. In keeping with this practice, "The Historical Public Records Office of the Province of Saskatchewan" receives only documents which have never left the possession of the government. It leaves other historical material to be acquired and preserved by libraries, including the Library of Parliament, the Library of the University, and historical societies.

Professor Morton insists that the chief task in the organization of a Public Records Office is the preparation of requisite calendars and indexes. These are practically complete for the whole material of Territorial times. The calendars of the material of the North-West Territorial government extend to 2000 pages typed single-space. By arrangement with the Committee on Public Records in Regina a duplicate copy of the calendars and indexes is deposited in the Library of Parliament within reach of government departments for consultation and to enable them to make enquiries of the Public Records Office. It was decided to include the manuscript Minutes of the Councils and Legislatures and of the Orders-in-Council as Public Records since by so doing the relations subsisting between them and the *Sessional Papers* and the correspondence of the government would be revealed. It was also decided to have the correspondence between the Territorial government and the Dominion authorities copied. This has been done. Finally, it was decided to receive the archives of corporations functioning under acts of provincial legislature to save them from destruction, always provided that their authenticity remained unimpaired, that is that they came directly from the corporations themselves or from their legal representatives. Very valuable materials of this kind, which are kept separate from the Public Records proper, have already been acquired.

A report upon conditions in Manitoba, prepared by Mr. J. L. Johnston, Provincial Librarian, Winnipeg, was read by Professor W. L. Morton of the University of Manitoba. Mr. Johnston pointed out that Public Records in Manitoba have been subject to destruction by fire, pests, floods, and unsatisfactory policies on the part of some departmental officials. At present such records are scattered in buildings throughout Winnipeg and the province where they are subject to these and other changes. The continuation of this situation will ensure their destruction. In recent years the lack of records for official purposes has demonstrated the need to maintain unbroken the essential records of government and governmental policies and activities. A more satisfactory policy towards these matters is a definite possibility as soon as conditions are normal. A new building

is planned in which an area is included for the housing of records and files. The recent reorganization of the Manitoba Historical and Scientific Society in a modern form coincides with this planned development. At the time of the revision of the Legislative Library Act in 1940, provision for the establishment of a Division of Public Records and Archives was included. This provision is subject to enactment by proclamation.

The situation with regard to other historical and archival materials is somewhat similar to the story of Public Records. With the erection of a new building accommodation may become available for the consolidation of the historical material located in the Legislative Library which under the impetus of an active Historical Society will increase rapidly. The consolidation of the records and volumes of the Legislative Library and of the Historical Society in suitable rooms adjacent to the library, with maps and illustrative material included, is a hope for the immediate future.

Professor Fred Landon, Librarian of the University of Western Ontario, told of the regional collection of history at that university. Beginning with certain small collections of papers which were acquired by the library, the collection was greatly increased by the acquisition of large stores of records, first from the court house of Middlesex County and later from the court house of Huron County. These and other records are being organized, the idea being the building up of an archives of Western Ontario, illustrative of its social, economical, and political history. There is no attempt to go beyond the particular region lying west of a line drawn between Hamilton and Owen Sound. The collection is directed by Miss Elsie M. Murray and in order to extend its usefulness and also to stimulate interest in local history generally two mimeographed publications are issued. *Western Ontario Historical Notes*, issued quarterly, is now in its second volume. *Western Ontario History Nuggets*, is issued from time to time, each number containing either a document or an original piece of research. Four *Nuggets* have so far appeared.

Dr. J. J. Talman, Assistant Librarian of the University of Western Ontario, former Archivist of Ontario, stated that the Department of Public Records and Archives of Ontario has a name which would justify the collection of any kind of historical material but unfortunately the name is practically all that exists at the moment. During the early years of the century much material was collected by the late Colonel Fraser and that material is carefully preserved and is available for students. This consists of printed manuscript collections, for example those of John Strachan, John Beverley Robinson, A. N. Buell, etc.; newspapers of which there is a good collection; land records, which are true public records having been transferred officially from the Crown Lands Department to the Archives; maps; pamphlets; printed material such as old directories; and a few pictures. The manuscript material has been well calendared by Miss Helen McClung.

In 1923 the Bureau of Archives was made a department and an act was passed providing for the regular transfer to the Archives of obsolete government material and the destruction of useless records on the authority of the Archivist. In some cases the provisions of the act have been observed.

In 1934 more than half the Archives staff was dismissed and the department was able to do nothing except carry on. There is hope that a change for the better may be on the way.

No report upon the provincial Archives of the Province of Quebec was made as M. Antoine Roy found it impossible to be present.

Professor A. G. Bailey of the University of New Brunswick reported that there was at present no special office of archives in New Brunswick. He stated that for a very long period beginning before Confederation the Public Records of the province had been shamefully neglected, in support of which he cited specific facts and quoted from the late Dr. W. C. Milner's report to the Canadian Historical Association in 1929. He suggested the possibility that this state of affairs might be due to the absence of a sense of historic continuity, and speculated on the effect of Loyalist attitudes and those engendered by the timber trade in this regard. By contrast there had occurred within recent years what had been referred to as an historical renaissance in the Maritime Provinces, due to a considerable extent to the efforts of Dr. Webster and others, as a result of which conditions were much improved. He expressed the hope that, as a sequel to the present discussion, recommendations would go forward from the Canadian Historical Association to the various governments throughout the Dominion with a view to the establishment of Public Record Commissions and Archives where such organizations did not already exist.

Professor D. C. Harvey, the Archivist for Nova Scotia, reported that the province had early turned its attention to the care of records; in 1857 had appointed a Records Commission, and a Records Commissioner, who carried on until his death in 1891. From 1891 to 1929 the collection which he had made was not increased to any extent but was kept by the Curator of the Museum, who turned it over to the Public Archives which were established by statute in 1929. The Statute of 1929 provided for a non-political administration of the Archives by a Board of Trustees, and gave a wide definition of archives to include not only the public records proper which were in the possession of the government or had been vested in the government by previous legislation but also all materials public and private that might be regarded as of historical interest. Therefore, while the Public Records that might be of use to the government were to be preserved and made accessible, the other needs and the convenience of historical students were not neglected. Moreover, the government of Nova Scotia has provided and is prepared to provide generously for the upkeep and administration of the Archives Building and its contents. At present the policy of the Archives is to accept everything of historical value; but, in the arrangement and disposition of the various collections, to make a distinction between Public and Private Records, and to describe the pictures and monuments as an historical museum within the Archives building. The fact that this building is fireproof has perhaps led the Board to accept some material which might have been deposited elsewhere, although the convenience of historical investigators might have dictated the same policy.

The situation in Prince Edward Island was also briefly described. While there has been no well worked out policy, care has been taken to

preserve a good deal of material which is housed in the Provincial Building in Charlottetown.

It was the view of this meeting that, while there were some signs of improvement, the situation in general was a deplorable one, and that the Association should take whatever steps it could to draw this to the attention of public authorities and others who might assist in bringing about an improvement.

DISCUSSION

R. G. Trotter gave a short summary of the importance of microfilm to present historical research stating that microfilm as an aid to Archives and to private scholars is no longer in the experimental stage, as it was when its possibilities were discussed at the McGill meeting of this Association in 1933. Much experimental investigation by scholars as well as by technicians has now resulted in the development of a variety of apparatus and methods which are sufficiently standardized to warrant their adoption. For the time being, however, the demands of war for photographic equipment has made it unavailable for other purposes. As soon as the war is over, there will be plenty of equipment available and added experience of its possibilities. Archives and libraries will find microfilm invaluable for making copies of perishable materials and of materials whose bulk is disproportionate to their value. By its use they can also most easily obtain copies of material in private possession and can fill gaps in their own files such as newspapers.

It is important that any plans as to buildings and staffs should recognize the usefulness of such methods and make adequate provision for them.

It is important also that the making of microfilm copies of Archival material for scholars' use should not fall into commercial hands. It is desirable that Archives should provide facilities for scholars to use their own cameras as well as make it possible to purchase such copies at cost.

Representations to governments might well stress the utility and economy of such techniques and thus help to show that while Archives were concerned with records of the past, it is important that they handle their current problems with up-to-date efficiency.