

Archives & Collections Society

A plea for archival support

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Very recently, Library and Archives Canada announced the closure of the Canadian Book Exchange Centre; as of March 6, 2008, the Centre will no longer accept publications from the private sector or from government and international organizations for redistribution among libraries. The Centre will shut its doors permanently effective June 30, 2008. The Centre has for the last thirty five years redistributed millions of documents, mostly serials and periodicals, from excess holdings of libraries and archives to other institutions in a position to conserve them and make them available to the public.

I would argue strongly that dismissing the closure of the Canadian Book Exchange as just another victim of the digital age, abetted by a “green” urge to cut down on the use of paper, is short-sighted; it is impossible to either estimate what proportion of the printed word is already or soon to be digitized let alone guarantee perpetual access to the printed words of many centuries. Any loss whatsoever represents a loss to current educational values and a real gap in our cultural responsibility to future generations.

In times of fiscal restraint especially, public money must be spent with care and economy. It is equally important that all levels of government under the pressure of immediate circumstances do not adopt a “penny-wise-pound-foolish” policy that may result later in heavy and perhaps irreparable loss. Pleas for the preservation of historical records are too seldom put forward. We wish that this paper, inspired in part by a note in the Canadian Historical Review of 1934, could be read and carefully considered by every elected representative in the country – at

federal, provincial and municipal level. Its argument could be proved to the hilt with illustrations many times over.

The principal function of archival holdings is not merely to meet the requests of private individuals or even of educational institutions, but to keep and preserve the records for the proper conduct of public business and the accurate determination of national, provincial, municipal and individual rights. The commercial value of the records to the nation and to the business man must be recognized and financial support must be provided. In the annals of the courts, for example, over the years there is abundant evidence that vast sums have been saved to the nation as well as to the public by the timely production of documents, surveys, maps and plans at one time considered worthless. The great monetary value, to the Governments and private citizens, of material rescued from destruction is apt to be overlooked by those who consider the use of archival holdings as being solely for historical purposes. Hundreds of thousands of documents now in an excellent state of preservation, in portfolios or neatly bound volumes, were received in a dirty, dilapidated state, and, before they were safe or fit to handle, had to be cleaned, pressed and repaired. Hundreds of runs of serials, whose continuity is often primordial, have been completed. Thousands of maps that seemed fit only for the rubbish heap have been skilfully treated, and with care will last indefinitely. Much of this one-time discarded material is now a most valuable national asset.

Over the years, invaluable work has been done at the federal level and in the provinces through archives, public libraries, and historical societies. It would appear now, however, that in Ottawa, in some of the provinces and in most of the municipalities throughout the country the indifference is appalling. All levels of government would be well advised to consider that, even from the political point of view, they stand to gain by providing the modest financial support which makes possible a real advance in the development of archival holdings.

Governments will find that the advice and assistance of interested and well-trained people will be given gladly and without expense, which to say the least is not usual in cases where the expert is called in.

It is neither practical nor advisable that the preservation of provincial, regional and local records should be undertaken by Library and Archives Canada. Centralization would here defeat its own aims. Regional and specialized records should be available for consultation both by students and government departments in the regions or localities of interest. There are non-federal interests and loyalties which can only be served adequately by a network of decentralized archiving.

The Canadian Book Exchange Centre has run an active and effective programme for thirty five years that has enormously assisted in meeting these criteria. I am in a unique position to judge the effectiveness of the programme, as I have the responsibility for collections management at the Archives and Collections Society- a federally incorporated charitable organization. As Executive Director, I also have overall responsibility for fundraising. Given these two roles, I can unequivocally state that without this programme – responsible for perhaps twenty per cent of our serial holdings – the Society would not hold several near complete sets of highly consulted publications amongst more than six hundred periodical titles that we make available.

In all seriousness, on practical not merely on sentimental grounds, we urge the plea for adequate support of archives and historical studies. No self-respecting society can neglect or wantonly destroy the records of its own development without living to regret it.

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