

Submission to the Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel on the Future of Libraries and Archives
Reflections on the National Acquisition Strategy

In considering the future of archives in Canada, and, more specifically, a Canadian archival system, it may be useful to reflect on the experience of the 1988 attempt by the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA) to establish a National Acquisition Strategy. I believe there are systemic forces affecting Canada's archival development, which must be recognized in any collective effort to preserve our documentary heritage; these forces were at play in 1988 and remain central to archival work today.

The dream of many Canadian archivists has been to develop a national archival system that would strive to make the documentary heritage of Canada a meaningful part of contemporary society. After much lobbying for federal government support, the Canadian archival community seemed to realize this dream with the creation of the CCA in 1985. The mandate of the CCA was "preserve and provide access to the Canadian documentary heritage by improving the administration, effectiveness and efficiency of the archival system". To execute this mandate the CCA was structured to include representatives of provincial and territorial archives councils (from which the executive board was selected) which, in turn, were (and still are) composed of representatives from individual institutions within each jurisdiction. Therefore, contrary to the structure of the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) and the Association des archivistes du Québec (AAQ) both of which represent archival professionals, the CCA was (and remains today) institutionally based.

One of the priorities of the CCA was the development of a national acquisition strategy to ensure that, as much as possible, a full record of the development of Canada was acquired, preserved, and made accessible. In 1988 the CCA struck a committee to develop such a strategy. Over the next few years a nation-wide survey was completed to assess the acquisition practises of member institutions. Among others, the committee produced a publication entitled *Building a National Acquisition Strategy*, which suggested that the success of a national acquisition strategy would be based in large part on the development of acquisition networks across the country. At a CCA priorities and planning meeting in 1994, however, the general consensus was that the development of any kind of national acquisition strategy was not a priority. As a result the CCA Executive abolished the committee in 1995.

As Chair of the CCA committee originally tasked with creating the national acquisition strategy, I have spent time reflecting on why that initiative was not successful. I articulated my thoughts on the demise of the strategy in an article I wrote for the *ACA Newsletter* in 1995, and I summarize them again below. I do not believe a great deal has happened in the two decades since that time to change the underlying forces at play, which – as I mentioned at the outset – challenge any attempt to develop collective programs for archival development.

There is a deficiency in the current Canadian archival system. No matter what types of archival materials are managed – corporate, church, personal, government, or otherwise – the vast majority of archival repositories in this country, are institutionally based. That is, they are established and managed by a larger institution, such as: a government agency, a university, a community group, a business, or a non-profit organization. These archival institutions exist to perform a specific, mandated task: either to acquire and manage institutional records and archives, or to acquire and preserve non-institutional archives for specific research purposes. Because these repositories are answerable to their institutional masters, their ability to participate in collective initiatives, particularly in the area of acquisition, is constrained. Their first priority is to their own organization, not to the wider archival community or Canadian society.

Because it is made up of such institutions, the CCA has to serve its members' needs first and foremost or they, the archival repositories that comprise that membership, will simply not participate. Much as individual archivists may wish to support collective initiatives, they must take direction from their institutional leaders, which overwhelmingly requires that archival service focus on the institution's priorities and requirements. Inevitably then, because of this systematic pressure to address institutional priorities, the CCA has become an organization whose success is measured by how effective its members believe it is in serving their specific needs, not its success in supporting the wider and less tangible goal of preserving Canada documentary heritage.

For example, when the CCA was first created a number of national priorities were identified to address issues such as the need for descriptive standards, the lack of quality conservation strategies, limited access to archives, and the lack of coordination over acquisition. At the time though, the archival community argued that reducing the backlog of unprocessed archives in their particular repositories was their first institutional priority. Participation in national initiatives would have to wait until the backlog had been addressed. As a result the CCA established a temporary funding program to help their members reduce their backlogs. The CCA did link institutional requirements with national priorities by supporting the use of *Rules for Archival Description* (developed by the Bureau of Canadian Archivists in 1990), but if archival institutions had not received CCA funding to reduce their backlogs, there is no guarantee that they would have adopted *RAD* as a descriptive tool. As the years progressed, the number of national initiatives steadily decreased while the backlog reduction program, i.e. money that could be used to process institutional archives, continued under a number of different titles, drawing an ever-increasing percentage of the budget, until LAC discontinued this funding in 2011.

By definition, a national acquisition strategy focuses on records not covered by existing acquisition mandates: neglected or “orphaned” records, as it were. At one time, it might have been realistically hoped that existing archival institutions would expand their mandates to cover such neglected records. However that is no longer the case. Archival operations perform within the confines of a specific, and often relatively narrow, mandate. It is not easy, if it is even possible, to ask for more resources to expand the repository’s scope of acquisitions beyond the limits already defined by the institution. More problematic is the difficulty of preserving digital records. Unlike analog archives, which can simply go on a shelf until resources are available to process them, and which may stay safe and unchanged for decades, digital records demand

immediate attention to ensure they are adequately preserved. They also demand significant, often scarce, institutional resources.

A national acquisition strategy requires that the archival community grow beyond its professional and institutional boundaries. The people who create records, and the people who use those records (from records creators to historians, lawyers, and the general public), are those who perceive a need for an archival repository. They alone can create archives. Archivists don't establish mandates, and they don't create archival institutions; they work in them.

Ultimately, I do not believe Canadian archival repositories can be effective partners in any collective archival initiative, be it acquisition planning or other national priorities, if those initiatives do not first and foremost directly support the sponsor institution's responsibility to look after its own records. What is missing in this equation is an entity with the mandate and resources to support the overall well-being of Canada's documentary heritage, irrespective of institutional or professional demands. The current Canadian archival network consists of the CCA and its provincial and territorial members, which are dedicated to the interests of archival institutions, along with the ACA, AAQ, and provincial and territorial associations dedicated to the interests of archival professionals. Effectively no one speaks exclusively on behalf the documentary record. The solution may be the creation of such an independent entity, with the mandate to promote, support, sustain, and expand Canada's documentary heritage wherever it is found. Such an organization could be an agent of change. It could take over all the strategic functions initially envisioned for the CCA, including activities such as developing a national acquisition strategy, creating and overseeing an endowment fund, conducting preservation research, and so on.

Critical to the success of such an agency is that it have stable and sufficient funding to fulfil its responsibilities. Most importantly, this entity should be composed of a board of directors that includes representatives from outside the archival community: people who have a stake in the documentary heritage of Canada but not specifically in the promotion of their profession or the protection of their particular institution. Ideal board members would include historians, genealogists, lawyers, social and physical scientists, economists, and so on. I believe other countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia, have implemented a similar approach to the strategic development of their documentary heritage resources.

For Canada to move forward with any collective archival effort, we must stop relying only on archival institutions and archival professionals. We must engage the public in the important goal of valuing society's records and archives, so that the archival community can perform the services we perform best: helping our institutions preserve their documentary heritage and, thereby, creating a truly sustainable national archival system.

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