



Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society

Brief

Presented to

Royal Society of Canada

Expert Panel on the Status and Future of Canada's Libraries and Archives

By

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"A wise nation preserves its records, gathers up its muniments, decorates the tombs of its illustrious dead, repairs its great public structures and fosters national pride and love of country by perpetual references to the sacrifices and glories of the past."

~ Joseph Howe (1871)

From the earliest communication efforts of humanity to the present day libraries and archives have fulfilled an essential role in assembling, preserving, and making accessible the evidence of history. Our society depends on access to information and freedom of speech, which places libraries and archives in a pivotal role at the centre of democratic communities. The burgeoning growth of information, which exceeds imagination today, gives libraries and archives opportunities and a responsibility to continue to serve as the hub of the information commons. This role is challenged by fiscal stresses and difficulties in predicting the impact of rapid technological innovation. The Royal Society of Canada's initiative in establishing an Expert Panel to assess the status and future of Canada's libraries and archives is timely, and the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society appreciates the opportunity to present this brief to the Panel. Members of the Society were invited to contribute to the preparation of this brief and the executive sought the advice of researchers and other interested individuals locally and nationally. The Association of Health Sciences Archives and Museums Nova Scotia and members of the Canadian Science and Technology Historical Association provided comments. Collectively, all of their input informed this brief.

The Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society

Established in 1878, the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society has fostered the study of the history of this province for 135 years. With a membership of close to 300 today, the Society continues to offer a long-standing program of monthly public lectures from September through May that regularly attract audiences of 75 to 125 attendees. Senior scholars and new researchers present lectures based on the analysis of historical evidence made accessible by archives and libraries in the region and further afield. The inaugural lecture of the 2013-2014 season, for example, was co-sponsored by the Royal Society of Canada and featured Dr. Elizabeth Mancke, Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canadian Studies, University of New Brunswick, and three distinguished panelists (Kenneth Donovan, Dr. James Hillier, and Anne Marine Lane Jonah) who addressed the topic "In the Balance: Atlantic Canada and the Legacy of the Peace of Utrecht." In addition, to the public lecture series, the Society publishes a substantial scholarly journal available in print and recently also online through contract with Proquest. In the summer of 2013, the Society launched a newly designed website, which is complemented by Facebook and Twitter accounts to promote the history of Nova Scotia. The members of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society are "consumers" of the collections and services of libraries and archives, the Society contributes to libraries and archives through its programs and journal, and the Society has a mandate to promote the history of the province and to some extent the history of the country.

Current Status of Libraries and Archives

Over the past quarter century libraries and archives have been responding to technological innovations by adopting and developing technologies to handle numerous processes and to deliver public services. The pressures of change have mounted as rapid developments in digital technologies have been transforming present day society. Libraries and archives are currently operating under significant stresses while also presented with opportunities to extend their resources and services to more and more Canadians. Uncertainties about discerning the future compound the situation.

Anxieties / Concerns

Anxieties and concerns about libraries and archives have been manifested at several levels as the following points illustrate:

- While digital technologies have enhanced the operation of organizations, government departments, and the lives of individuals, capturing even a representative sample of the digital output of today for historical purposes is problematic. The ephemeral nature of digital technologies presents obvious preservation challenges. The actual and potential loss of historical evidence is immense and of considerable concern to present day historians who worry that future generations will be severely limited in appreciating their heritage.
- The flood of information has resulted in significant processing backlogs in archives, more so than in libraries. Staffing capacities have not kept pace with the growing volume, and increasing mandate responsibilities in areas such as outreach, community history, and genealogy add to the processing challenge.
- The discontinuance by the federal government of the National Archival Development Program in 2012 had an immediate negative impact on the ability of smaller archival institutions in Nova Scotia (as well as in other provinces) to proceed with projects all designed to improve public access to archival holdings.
- The direction that Library and Archives Canada has taken over the past five years or so has caused considerable consternation across the country regarding acquisition, preservation, and access to cultural heritage resources at a national level. As one example, the discontinuance of inter-library loan services, especially of unique items only available from Library and Archives Canada, has been met with disbelief that a national institution would implement such a policy.
- The dismantling of government libraries with the loss of records and collections has been unprecedented. A case in point has been the closing of most of the libraries of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans resulting in the discard of major collections assembled over decades. This process proceeded in the face of considerable protest, which Margaret Munro documented in a national Postmedia article in April 2013 (“Closure of fisheries’ libraries called a ‘disaster’ for science”).
- Fiscal constraints are forcing decisions about collection practices that download responsibilities to institutions with limited capacity to respond or simply inability to respond at all. The result will severely

restrict historical study due to the loss of collections or no efforts to assemble and preserve historical evidence.

Opportunities

Amidst the types of concerns outlined above, opportunities arise and have been pursued. The Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society acknowledges and supports the archival and library communities for their ingenuity in taking initiatives to enhance citizen engagement with our cultural heritage.

- Among the initiatives, digitization projects stand out. The Nova Scotia Archives, for example, has made large volumes of historical records publicly accessible through digitization of thousands of photographs, documents, etc. over the past five years. Web tracking statistics confirm that these digitized materials are actively used by Nova Scotians and many others worldwide. Vast holdings remain undigitized, however, offering opportunities for further development.

- Collaboration between cultural heritage institutions, such as the decades-old NovaNet Consortium of academic libraries in Nova Scotia and the work of the Council of Nova Scotia Archives, emphasizes the value and importance of such ventures. Opportunities continue to arise for collaboration among researchers and libraries and archives and between public and private sector institutions. These initiatives may have been prompted by the need for efficient use of resources, particularly financial resources, but the benefits of collaboration include synergies arising from the perspectives of related cultural heritage institutions, among others. Collaboration can lead to better rationalization of mandates of institutions and their related strategies to encompass the cultural heritage of the province, region, and country.

Recommendations Regarding the Future of Libraries and Archives

In the words of Marcus Tullius Cicero, “Not to know what has been transacted in former times is to be always a child. If no use is made of the labors of past ages, the world must remain in the infancy of knowledge” (Cited in T. Standage. *Writing on the Wall. Social Media—the First 2000 Years*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 1). With this perspective in mind, the Society recommends that the Expert Panel give due consideration to the following:

- The fate of information should not be politicized. Discarding library and archival collections or allowing information to be lost should not occur due to political expediency or ideology. The fate of the country is jeopardized when libraries and archives are governed in this manner.

- The benefits of collaboration among libraries and archives as well as other cultural heritage institutions should be emphasized. Financial pressures alone warrant further attention be given to this point. Greater rationalization of efforts and synergies of collaborative ventures will be a primary outcome. Collaboration requires leadership and at a national level, Libraries and Archives Canada should be empowered to provide pan-Canadian leadership.

- Continued emphasis should be placed on digitization of historical records. Today, amateur as well as professional historians wish and expect digital access to the holdings of our repositories. The value of

the original holdings must not be misunderstood, though. Digitization does not provide a license to discard the originals. Experience with previous inadequate digitization has proven that originals need to be retained.

- Technological innovations need to be encouraged and supported to overcome the problem of loss of historical evidence due to technological obsolescence. This matter is a societal problem of considerable urgency.

- Greater effort be placed on increasing awareness of Canadians about the resources available to them through libraries and archives. Ultimately, increased awareness will lead to greater appreciation of the history of the country as Joseph Howe envisaged over a century ago.