

At the “rim of creative dissatisfaction”: Archivists and Acquisition Development

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In the prologue to his 1987 book of essays entitled *Hidden History: Exploring Our Secret Past*, historian Daniel Boorstin writes that in the New World, “creativity has flourished” on something he terms “the Fertile Verge.” Boorstin defines a verge as simply “a place of encounter between something and something else.” He explains:

The long Atlantic Coast, where early colonial settlements flourished, was, of course, a verge between land and sea. Every movement inward into the continent was a verge between ... European civilization and the ... culture of the American Indians. As cities became sprinkled around the continent, each was a verge between the ways of the city and those of the countryside.¹

Boorstin contends that each new verge in our history brought with it challenges, and an array of “new mixtures and new confusions.” He concludes that it was these which brought European emigrants to the “rim of creative dissatisfaction” where creativity flourished, and gave them the ability to adopt new ideas, and solve old problems in new ways.²

Archivists whose responsibilities include collecting private records are struggling at a verge today. It is the place of encounter at which our traditional thinking regarding appraisal and acquisition development has confronted the extraordinary volume and increasing technological complexity of contemporary records. We have been stalled at this verge for many years, and only a heightened sense of creative dissatisfaction will enable us effectively to fulfil our mission of making records of enduring value available for use through acquisition, arrangement and description, and preservation.

More than a half century has passed since our first glimpse of how twentieth-century record-keeping practices were pushing us into a new era. In 1937, when Sir Hilary Jenkinson was revising his *Manual of Archive Administration*, he recalled that the original edition had raised “at least one new question in Archive Science; one which has been little considered prior to that time.” The question was that of quantity; the harbinger that Jenkinson had seen in 1922 was the “impossibly bulky” holdings of records that had been amassed during the First World War. Fifteen years later, Jenkinson had become

even more concerned with preserving the “archives of the future” than he had been in 1922, and he observed that “the post-War years have only served to emphasize [the problem of bulk].”³ In the past, he wrote, “we have assumed that the Archivist had always space to house [records] and that consequently the question of whether or not Archives were to be preserved at all did not arise.”⁴ “There is a real danger,” he concluded, “that the Historian of the future, not to mention the Archivist, may be buried under the mass of manuscript[s]”⁵ and “that in the future research work [in] Archives may become a task hopelessly complicated by reason of their mere bulk.”⁶

At the same time as Jenkinson was writing, others, on both sides of the Atlantic, were echoing similar concerns. H.G.T. Christopher, in his 1938 monograph *Palaeography and Archives*, observed, “in recent years [records] have been bulky, and generally no attempt has been made at selection, and the archive repository is faced with either taking over a collection which would use more space than its probable value merited, or of selecting material.”⁷ A manuscript curator in the United States, analysing local historical societies, noted how “the acceptance of what happened fortuitously to be available has . . . been one of the chief causes of the accumulation of disparate, disorganized, masses of manuscripts,” and concluded, “There is little virtue in mere acquisition if it is divorced from intelligent purpose.”⁸

Since Jenkinson’s time, the archival profession has become more accustomed to the need for selection. Succeeding generations of archivists, such as Philip C. Brooks, Herman Kahn and especially Theodore Schellenberg, articulated a series of values in an effort to guide archivists through the decision-making process.⁹ However, much of the appraisal theory they developed was conceived within the context of a single institution seeking to preserve its own records. Their appraisal guidelines were designed to provide archivists with a yardstick against which to measure individual record groups and series. Nevertheless, their seminal work has proven beneficial to all archivists, whether we work in an institutional or a public archives. In either instance the fundamentals of appraisal drive our selection process; archivists try to make decisions on the basis of the archival values that Schellenberg and others have articulated. Yet there has always seemed to be a gap between pure appraisal theory and how this theory applies more broadly to acquisition development, even though the problem of bulk is present in both instances. It is relatively straightforward to apply evidential and informational values in the micro sense to a single fonds or records series; it is more complex to apply these same values at the macro-level to a repository full of public and private archives. In order to do so, archivists must go beyond simply identifying venerable archival values; we need to define better the context in which we should apply them.

In his article on deaccessioning archival materials, Leonard Rapport stated the problem precisely when he observed that

Schellenberg did not advocate accessioning records just because they were evidential or informational. He was aware that there was not a record created that is totally devoid of such values, however minute. These values had to be important values, and it is against this adjective that we collide and sometimes founder.¹⁰

The fact that Schellenberg and the others chose to use the word “value” is unfortunate, because they were really talking about evidential and informational *content*. But by

using the term *value*, they implied to succeeding generations of archivists that whatever was evidential or informational was valuable and should be saved. Done properly, appraisal is comprised of several activities, but conceptually it should always include two important steps. In determining whether or not to acquire a set of records, archivists should first decide whether or not the records themselves contain evidential or informational content. But having done so we must then pause to ask, "So what?" The final decision regarding whether to acquire an individual fonds must be made with an eye on the larger universe that is defined by broader acquisition development policies. Stated another way, the principles of appraisal help us to answer the question, "*Why* am I saving this?" — while acquisition policies force us to answer the equally important question, "*Why* am I saving this?"

Unfortunately, while appraisal theory has developed over the years, ideas regarding acquisition policies have lagged behind. Much of our early literature on acquisition development was written by manuscript curators, whose perspective was heavily influenced by the assumptions of the age of scarcity. Policies were based on a presumption of competition, wherein the few prizes worth collecting were worth fighting for. They were written for a world in which it was important to mark one's territory: a world in which, as the director of a midwestern state historical society once stated, "Cooperation in collecting is synonymous with abdication."¹¹

Such literature has been thin gruel for those interested in developing acquisition policies equipped to serve the needs of contemporary archival repositories. We have all read about the importance of imposing linguistic, geographical or chronological constraints on our acquisitions.¹² Our literature reminds us to include a statement of the archives' legal authority, and its mission.¹³ We have been told to consider the type of programmes which our archives supports, and the clientele whom it serves. We know to include collecting levels, present strengths, and circumstances under which materials may be deaccessioned.¹⁴ As a result, we can wax eloquent on the need for well-defined policies; we can articulate beautifully-crafted statements of lofty purpose, mission and goals. In the same way, we have learned that acquisition policies are suitable occasions for self-congratulation on our past successes, such as "The Society is justly proud of its reputation as a nationally important research institution [and] . . . [a]ny reconsideration of Society collecting must rest on [this] secure foundation."¹⁵ But these observations do not attack the root of the problem, which is similar to that which Rapport described *vis-à-vis* Schellenberg's values: we are accessioning too many fonds that, while they may fall within our geographical, chronological and linguistic parameters, simply do not contain important information.

For many of us, such acquisition policies — written more to legitimize collecting activity than to focus it — have not been able to save us from ourselves. Most such policies have been conceived in dual isolation — as though archival records were the only source of information which archivists need to consider, and by pretending that other archival repositories did not exist. The results of this predilection to "go it alone" have been unfortunate. Because similar information can be found in many different formats, acquisition decisions that are based on what is contained only in other archival records are inadequate. In the same way, acquisition policies that fail to consider what information may be contained in other types of documentation, leave themselves open to simply perpetuating the same frustrating gaps and wasteful duplication that now characterize many archival collections.

By ignoring other repositories—both archival and non-archival—with similar missions, we have tended to equate preservation with possession; as one writer phrased it, “some institutions regard manuscript collecting as a branch of intercollegiate athletics and vigorously strive to beat the competition.”¹⁶ Many of us cling to the notion that it is both possible and desirable to bring together under one roof all the documentation dealing with a particular subject. The idea is not far removed from our professional ancestors of the last century, who assumed that it was possible to bring together all the important documentation on a given topic between the covers of a series of books. We are trying to accomplish the same type of goal as Ebenezer Hazard, whose ill-fated monographic series, “American State Papers,” was to have included “every important paper relating to America, of which either the original, or authentic copies can be obtained.”¹⁷ The goal was not viable during the age of scarcity, and it is less so today both because of the quantity and what has been termed the “integration of modern information.”¹⁸ Just as Hazard failed in the previous century, so too shall we if we cling to our antiquated assumptions.

This was one of the points of conflict in the debate about “total archives,” which has as one of its dimensions “total” defined in terms of medium.¹⁹ Whether or not it is true, as some contend, that “the separation of archival records by medium caused archivists to lose their perspective on why they are saving the records in the first place,” it is unfortunate that some archivists thought it was *they* who needed to be responsible for preserving those abstract paintings set in Mexico and Peru, or the “costume collection containing examples of Greek, Roman, and even primitive caveman’s garb.”²⁰ While it is important for the archivist to *know about* and appreciate such resources and the information they contain — it is not necessary for archivists to *possess* them.²¹ In such instances, archivists would be best advised to develop better cooperative links with their colleagues in the museum and library communities, than to shoulder the burden of preserving every medium of expression ourselves.

But our instinct is still to see ourselves in the role of a twentieth-century Horatius-at-the-Bridge: the last line of defence between preservation and oblivion. This causes us to make utterly ludicrous decisions regarding acquisition by cloaking ourselves in the virtue of maintaining culture: if I don’t save it, who will? At a 1987 conference, one archivist explained proudly how he had been offered a collection of risqué comic books. Although neither he nor his repository had even the slightest previous interest in risqué comic books (at least none to which he would admit), he promptly added them to the holdings so that they would be saved. Apparently it never even occurred to him that he might look elsewhere, before unwittingly opening another collecting area for his institution. But decisions such as his are being made by archivists every day. Our intentions are good, but we contribute to the problem rather than ameliorate it. We need, in other words, to ponder more fully those accounts that report poor Horatius’s demise despite his heroics!

But our most serious failing is that we have not taken the time to conceptualize adequately why we are saving the records which we have chosen to acquire. At times our attitude toward acquisition development seems to have been drawn from that passage in *Alice in Wonderland*, in which Alice asks the Cheshire Cat for directions:

“‘Cheshire Puss,’ [Alice] began . . . ‘Would you tell me please which way I ought to walk from here?’”

“‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat.”

“‘But I don’t much care—as long as I get somewhere.’ Alice added.”

“‘Oh you’re sure to do that,’ said the Cat, ‘if only you walk long enough.’”²²

We think we shall “get somewhere,” as long as we collect enough. Archivists have yet to act meaningfully upon F. Gerald Ham’s simple precept, from “The Archival Edge,” that “conceptualization must precede collection.”²³ We are still slaves to *form-based* rather than *information-based* methodologies that guide our efforts. In our minds we have been collecting records as *physical objects* when we ought to have been collecting records for the *information* they contain. We want to document religion, so we collect church records; we want to document organized labour, so we collect trade union records. As a result, we have lulled ourselves into believing that we are documenting particular subjects well simply because we have many related objects to show for our efforts. Ours is not unlike the situation that a critic of museum collecting once described:

every museum of any size possesses . . . great quantities, of material which it cannot hope to display and . . . duplicates of items already on exhibition. [One museum] has, for example, more than two hundred eighteenth-century pottery milk-jugs, in the form of a cow. They ranged side by side on a shelf . . . like some huge herd on a farm. This is investment banking, not museology.²⁴

The archival community has its own cow-shaped milk jugs. In the United States, one state historical society conducted a detailed analysis of its manuscript holdings in 1986. When it examined the topic of religion — a supposed area of strength — there were many fonds of church records to count. But despite the large numbers that had been amassed, it quickly became clear that decades of labour had documented, in fact, only a narrow spectrum of sacramental activity in a few principal Protestant denominations. There was precious little to offer beyond the names and dates that the genealogists covet. This may not have been investment banking as the museum critic defined it, but neither was it the result of thoughtful acquisition decisions.

Is it any wonder that our collections have too much information about some aspects of these subjects and not enough about others? By reading our annual reports it will become clear that many still equate the *size* of a repository’s holdings and the breadth of its collecting focus, with the *quality* of its programme. Many annual reports citing acquisitions habitually express themselves in terms of volume of information rather than in terms of knowledge.

We acquire donations of dubious value simply because we do not take the time to think carefully about why we are accepting them in the first place. We seem to have the same aversion to thoughtful or difficult decision-making that Jenkinson saw in records creators who saved multiple copies of individual documents, simply because it was easier to do so than to make a decision based on the importance of the document!²⁵ So it is with archivists and acquisitions. Because our acquisition policies lack sufficient specificity, we save records for the wrong reasons. One U.S. writer admitted that “it seems preferable to [retain] noncurrent records in the basement, attic, or elsewhere than to risk public outcry at the disposal of such records.”²⁶ In other instances we manage to convince ourselves that some researcher, some day, somehow, might find the records

useful in a “study” of some sort. *Whether* the studies we conjure up already have been done, *why* someone might do them in the first place, or *who* would care, are irrelevant. In either case we are hostages to perceived or imagined need; thus, it is easier to accept marginal records from the abundant harvest than it is simply to refuse them.

Those who have responded to the need for change find themselves immobilized by the traditions that have preceded them. They become stuck in the mire of generality when it comes time to indicate in meaningful terms what it is they want to document. Many acquisition policies of the past two decades announce a commitment to documenting the lives of “ordinary people” or the “common man,” without ever bothering really to define what constitutes “common” or “ordinary.” We speak in phrases such as “capturing the general fabric of experiences,” or capturing a “microcosm or representative sample of human activity.” We report how we are “documenting the [. . .] experience in the community.” Such statements sound good, or are useful as constructs that differentiate past from present practice, but alone they are insufficient as guidelines.

The impact of our vagueness has been marked. Much conventional wisdom regarding both appraisal and acquisition development exists in the form of lists naming the types of objects we want, rather than as a more thoughtful analysis describing the type of information we want from what we collect, or how to identify this information in the records which we collect. A typical acquisition policy begins by enumerating the types of objects (personal papers, letters, diaries, corporate records) we wish to collect. These are objects, not information. Even our descriptive practices have succumbed. We do not, as too many archival finding aids suggest, collect correspondence, annual reports or photographs. We collect information that happens to be preserved in these particular forms. Too often the result is as one archivist wrote:

There have been no stated and few apparent restrictions on ... material[s] that are admitted except that they must relate to one of [twenty-four ethnic] groups, be two-dimensional records rather than three-dimensional objects, and ‘deal with the causes of emigration ..., the actual processes of migration, or the experience of immigrants and their descendants.’ Every kind of personal paper, organizational record, and imprint has been considered desirable so long as it meets these criteria.²⁷

We also have been seduced by our own siren’s song of uniqueness. We forget that while the actual *objects* which we collect — the diaries and the soldier’s letters — may be unique, the *information* they contain may be neither unique nor even important. We have convinced ourselves that “since everything [we] collect is, in theory at least, unique, there is no such thing as building a foundation on the basic classics.” But the point is that we *do* need to build such a foundation — it must be one that is composed of information rather than lists of record types.²⁸ Furthermore, it is a foundation that is built upon a knowledge of the issues, functions or events relating to the topic we wish to document.

We archivists have paid a high price for our actions, and continue to do so every day. We waste precious resources. Every moment spent dealing with marginal or plainly inappropriate material prevents us from working around our troublesome verge. We must process and shelve those marginal fonds, and all the resources spent doing so are

lost to other activities more worthwhile. In this way, our backlog becomes larger and our shelves fuller. Our preservation dollars do not go so far as they might. Whenever we accept fonds that might be better housed elsewhere, we isolate the documents both intellectually and physically by placing them in a locale where they will be less well known or used than elsewhere: like the archives in Wisconsin that had as one of its holdings an inventory of a sixteenth-century Spanish Indian mission in Sonora, Mexico, the repository's only other holding which was even remotely associated with the mission being the records of the local university's Spanish Club!

But perhaps most regrettably we confuse those who would understand us, and thus remain aground on the shoals of our public image — as society's "attic" or "dusty shelves." Ultimately, we relegate research materials to an oblivion that is almost as final as destruction itself. What researchers frequently find reminds one of Arthur J. Balfour's comment on looking through Winston Churchill's voluminous scrapbooks: it was like "rummaging through a rubbish heap on the problematic chance of finding a cigar butt."²⁹

We can do better. Allowing that much of our previous thinking about acquisition policies is a good beginning, it is time to move beyond our present verge by focusing the power of our creative dissatisfaction on drafting policies that will better serve our needs in the age of abundance.

As a first step, we must move beyond the unconscious assumptions of the age of scarcity which still distort our thinking. Most of our current acquisition policies are too broadly conceived to be realistic in the Information Age. In the age of scarcity, it may have been possible to cast a broader net with respect to geographical and topical coverage, but now we must look with a sceptical eye at the grandiose goals that such policies declared. We can no longer be satisfied with such things as "The Society's . . . collections encompass materials from [the state], the [region], and the nation — as well as Canada — and cover a time span from the eighteenth century to the present."³⁰ Just as our professional forebears began to use appraisal to help limit their intake of records at the fonds level, so must we begin to use acquisition policies to limit our intake at the repository level. Given that we are awash with records, it should be clear that those statements, written decades earlier, and the goals they reflected, need to be scaled down. In certain respects those old statements are like the "gas guzzler" automobiles we have been forced to abandon. Like cars that gave nine miles to the gallon, broadly based, all-inclusive collecting policies were designed for a different era, and based on assumptions that are no longer true. It is no longer realistic, as one archival repository has done, to demarcate territory that encompasses the history and development of all ethnic groups in America. How can we even argue that it is possible for a regional archives to "document" comprehensively a particular geographical area — no matter how small — when one good-sized accession of business records would fill its shelves and occupy the attention of its staff into the next millennium? Archivists need to take a more realistic view of what we can actually hope to preserve.

Just as we must reduce our overall goals, we must learn to become more selective in choosing individual fonds to add to our holdings. Acquisition policies can be the cornerstone of this effort. In certain respects, the role of an acquisition policy is not to tell us what to collect; its real function is to delineate what we shall *consider* acquiring — an important distinction that we can use to good advantage. Policies build upon the

fundamental ideas of archival value that have guided archivists for decades, but they add another dimension to the decision-making process. They pick up where evidential and informational values leave off and should be used as frequently to refuse potential acquisitions, or refer them to a more appropriate repository, as to accept them.

To this end, our new acquisition policies should be written so that they can serve both an external and an internal purpose. Most of our earlier efforts, ordinarily compressed into a succinct page or two of brilliantly crafted prose, are useful only externally, as a brief introduction for laypersons and potential donors. But even though sweeping generalities such as, "It is the general policy of the . . . Society to interest itself in all material generated by or pertaining to the citizens of . . . [the] county,"³¹ may help in this way, they hinder us as well because, to the same potential donors, they seemingly exclude nothing. In an environment in which there are many records from which to choose, and so much duplication of information, they lack the precision we need in order to make intelligent decisions about acquiring a particular fonds.

Guidance in such decision-making is the internal purpose of a contemporary acquisition policy. However, it can be served only if the policy takes us beyond the generalities that the layperson can easily digest. We must have specificity to guide us when we are considering whether or not to accept an individual fonds and this can be achieved only if we take the time to define the local parameters against which we measure our traditional archival values.

In order to accomplish this, an acquisition policy should define not only the geographical or linguistic limits of our collecting focus and all the rest, it must also include a more specific definition and analysis of whatever phenomena we are hoping to document. To "document society in all its multiplicity and to transmit to posterity a manageable amount of records" is a broad mandate more easily stated than accomplished — even if it is defined within a narrow geographical or chronological context.³² For most archivists, more specific instructions will be helpful. Actually to *do* the conceptualizing required is a painstaking, slow and difficult process; it is not something that can be done in an afternoon of spontaneous discussion. Still, it must be done.

There are several models available to help with various aspects of this work. The SAMDOK project, wherein a group of Swedish museums initiated a cooperative programme better to document contemporary life in that country, is frequently cited as a premier example of inter-institutional cooperation. But in many respects its real significance, indeed that which is probably responsible for whatever success it enjoyed, is that the participants first took the time to conceptualize what it was they wanted to document in contemporary Swedish life in any case.³³ In a similar way, oral historians have long accepted the need for extensive research — including a "careful examination of [their] institution's existing holdings" — prior to conducting an interview.³⁴ Because they recognize this, oral historians are comparatively skilled at articulating the issues about which they want to collect information.³⁵ If oral historians can undertake exhaustive research for a single interview, then so can archivists before they agree to accept another 100 cubic metres of records.

There is also the documentation strategy framework. Whether or not one accepts fully this construct, its emphasis upon cooperation should be reflected in any acquisition policy. For example, the documentation strategy recognizes that, for a variety of

reasons, all information pertaining to a specific topic cannot be housed within a single institution. It actively involves archivists, museum curators, librarians and records managers, along with records users and records creators (or depositors) to ensure that important documentation is not lost. In attempting to arrive at a strategy for documenting a particular topic, it considers the entire range of informational resources, rather than only those that are archival. It demands that we associate more closely the information we want with the records we propose to acquire.³⁶

Having achieved a better overall understanding of the important issues or phenomena we want to document, we must then consider which archival sources will provide the information we need. It is tempting to oversimplify this process by simply posing the question, "What shall we collect?" But in looking at records creators, we should consider what portion of the information contained in the archival record is actually unique and necessary, and what portion duplicates information that can be found in published and other types of sources. In an age when the boundaries among archival, museum and library holdings are growing increasingly blurred, it only makes sense to build alliances with our colleagues in related professions instead of being over concerned with marking our territory. Archivists need to base their own decisions in part on what museum curators and librarians are preserving. Archival collecting policies must be both interdisciplinary and more cooperative, if they are to be effective. In many respects we need to be more like the immigrants whom Boorstin describes in his essay, who "created new verges between their imported ways and the imported ways of their neighbours and the new-grown ways of the New World."³⁷ Or as a colleague working on a common descriptive cataloguing system recently wrote, "When the culture wants integrated cultural information systems, neither archives, nor museums [nor libraries] can afford to be information isolationists."³⁸

Another facet of this effort to move away from information isolationism involves developing a fuller acceptance, integration and knowledge of the non-textual media of archival documentation, such as sound/moving image and electronic records which comprise an important segment in our universe of information. Unfortunately, for many the current state of knowledge is not unlike appraising documents of which we can read only one of every five words. In the past, archivists have been unduly influenced by researchers such as the historian who wrote, "I place the highest priority on the written word as an historical source . . . nothing matches the authenticity of a letter, or the minutes of a meeting, or a page from a diary conveying 'the past.'"³⁹ Notwithstanding such bias on the part of some users against non-textual records, our ideas about how to document topics should be based upon the full utilization of the entire spectrum of resources that are available to us. We must better learn how to extract from non-textual records more of the information they contain rather than simply continue using them in a secondary or supporting role. We must not perpetuate the practice of some who operate with two acquisition policies: one for textual and another for non-textual (normally [photo]graphic) records. In other words, we must do what our researchers have been doing all along: bring together traditional textual archival records with audiovisual and artefactual documentation, using the mix of information thus gained to satisfy our enquiries.

Finally, we need to do what our colleagues in allied professions have been doing for decades: our acquisition policies should provide for the inter-institutional com-

munication of holdings. The idea of lending materials is not new in the library community, and museums have been lending extremely valuable, unique works of art for years. But archivists have not moved beyond occasionally lending individual documents for exhibition purposes. For some reason, the concept of expanding this idea of lending entire fonds for *research* purposes remains revolutionary and controversial — some would even say heretical.

Nevertheless, the profession's limited experience with this concept shows that it can be used to good effect. Since 1962, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin has administered a statewide Area Research Center (ARC) network of regional archival repositories that permits the temporary transfer of original public and private archival fonds among network centres.⁴⁰ The benefits have been considerable. During the past thirty years, more than 10,000 inter-archives loan transactions have taken place within the network, for the benefit of thousands of researchers who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to use archival materials. No holdings have been lost due to transfer, and the possibility of borrowing archival materials from other network repositories has decreased competition among centres dramatically. Given the fact that there is far too much to collect, it has served everyone's purpose to carve out a smaller piece of the pie. Although, as archivists have recognized for decades, cooperation will not solve every dispute that arises from competing collecting interests, in Wisconsin, sharing has alleviated the need for archivists in the ARC network to feel as though they must collect everything themselves.⁴¹

In concluding "The Fertile Verge," Boorstin attributes to North Americans "three characteristic ways of thinking and feeling" that historically have helped to solve old problems in new ways. First has been a certain "self-awareness" that caused us to "notice more poignantly who we are, how we are thinking, and what we are doing."⁴² Just as our ancestors needed to adapt the customs and beliefs of the Old World to the realities of the North American frontier, so too must we as archivists adapt our current professional practice to the realities of the Information Age. It is no longer possible to document the same breadth of topics by saving the same records in the same way as our professional forebears did at the time of the First World War. Self-awareness should extend broadly to understanding the full implications of changes that have taken place both in the nature and the extent of the documentary record. Within individual repositories, self-awareness should also include achieving clearer understanding of the phenomena which the archives is attempting to document.

The second characteristic Boorstin ascribes to North Americans is a "special openness to novelty and change," that has enabled us to accept new ideas and whetted our appetite "for novelty and its charms."⁴³ Archivists must adjust to the changes brought about by new documentary media, and develop the skills necessary in order better to utilize audiovisual and electronic records. We need to consider narrowing our self-expectations to reflect new realities, rather than simply pursuing the elusive prize of more space, more money and more staff, that we think will ensure success. We must remain open to innovative approaches, such as circulating material among repositories and assisting records creators to take responsibility for their own records, as alternatives to simply collecting everything ourselves.

The third characteristic Boorstin saw in our immigrant ancestors was a "strong community-consciousness" that makes "we, the similars, lean on one another when we

confront the different and the unfamiliar," and encouraged newcomers to depend upon one another as they wrestled with common problems.⁴⁴ As "newcomers" to the Information Age, we must develop this same sense of community. Archivists need to build better bridges to the other information professions — especially our colleagues in museums and libraries — with whom we share many common problems and goals. The need for these bridges should be apparent in our acquisition policies. Cooperating with other archivists and with allied professionals will reduce our ultimate workload and the range of our self-inflicted responsibility. It will help us to make better acquisition decisions that fill gaps and avoid unnecessary duplication. Cooperation will help us to ensure that records with evidential and informational value, but which are out of scope topically or geographically, end up in more appropriate repositories. In a similar way, we need to cooperate with our users by remembering that we do not collect or preserve records as an end in itself; we do so in order that others may use what we have selected, whether by viewing it in an exhibit, by conducting personal research, or by reading the scholarship of someone else who has conducted research in our holdings. Acquiring records that are out of reasonable scope, of dubious value, or needlessly duplicative, serves these researchers poorly by increasing our workload and inevitable backlog. It also increases the clutter through which researchers must struggle in their search for information. By keeping in the back of our mind the researchers who (it is to be hoped) will use the records we collect, we must be able better to resist the temptation to acquire material such as that sixteenth-century Spanish Indian Mission fonds, or the 200th cow-shaped pottery jug.

Archivists will be able to move beyond the troublesome verge only if we are prepared to make some fundamental changes in the way we go about our work. Confronting the problem on an individual basis, or simply continuing to amass documentation on a broadly defined topic while deferring hard decisions, is no longer a sufficient response. We must approach the rim of creative dissatisfaction with an eye towards finally solving our problems, rather than merely postponing them.

Notes

- * Revised version of a paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Banff, Alberta, on 25 May 1991.
- 1 Daniel J. Boorstin, *Hidden History: Exploring our Secret Past* (New York, 1987), xiii.
- 2 *Ibid.*, xiv, xxv.
- 3 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration: New and Revised Edition* (London, 1937), p. 129.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 148-49.
- 7 H.G.T. Christopher, *Palaeography and Archives* (London, 1938).
- 8 Julian P. Boyd, "The Function of State and Local Historical Societies with Respect to Manuscripts," *Archives & Libraries* (Chicago, 1940), p. 129.
- 9 Nancy E. Peace, "Deciding What to Save: Fifty Years of Theory and Practice," *Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance* (Lexington, 1984), pp. 1-18.
- 10 Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Deaccessioning Archival Materials," *The American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981), p. 147.
- 11 F. Gerald Ham, "Documenting Our Times," (unpublished paper read before the Midwest Archives Conference, Columbia, Missouri, 16 October 1987), p. 1.
- 12 Robert L. Clark Jr., *Archive-Library Relations* (New York, 1976), p. 125.
- 13 Canadian Council of Archives, *Guidelines for Developing an Acquisition Policy* (Ottawa, 1990), pp. 1-3.
- 14 Faye Phillips, "Developing Collecting Policies for Manuscript Collections," *The American Archivist* 47, no. 1 (Winter 1984), pp. 31-42. This article also contains a useful review of American literature dealing with acquisition policies.
- 15 "Manuscript Collecting Policy for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin," (ca. 1974), p. 1. This policy was replaced in 1988.

- 16 Walter Rundell Jr., "To Serve Scholarship," *The American Archivist* 30 (October 1967), p. 56.
- 17 Donald R. McNeil (ed.), *The American Collector* (Madison, 1955), p. 2.
- 18 Helen W. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *The American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1986), pp. 111-12.
- 19 Terry Cook, "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on 'Total Archives'," *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80), pp. 141-42.
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- 22 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London, n.d.), p. 89-90.
- 23 F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *The American Archivist* (January 1975), p. 12.
- 24 Kenneth Hudson, *Museums for the 1980s: A Survey of World Trends* (New York), p. 25.
- 25 Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, p. 137. Jenkinson noted: "to think whether a copy of a letter is worth making is a troublesome matter. In old days, to make the copy was even more trouble and therefore the thinking was done: but now when ... it has become a mechanical, not an intellectual, task, the natural tendency is to avoid the painful process of thought; why exert oneself to decide whether four copies of a letter, or any copy at all, are necessary when the labour is only that of putting five sheets instead of one into a machine?"
- 26 Lisa B. Weber, *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States* (Atlanta, 1984), p. 84.
- 27 Susan Grigg, "A World of Repositories, A World of Records: Redefining the Scope of a National Collection," *The American Archivist* 48 (Summer 1985), p. 289.
- 28 Clark, *Archive-Library Relations*, p. 125.
- 29 William Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill: Visions of Glory: 1874-1932* (New York, 1983), p. 375.
- 30 "Manuscripts Collecting Policy for the State Historical Society of Wisconsin," p. 1.
- 31 "A Preliminary General Collecting Policy Statement of the Milwaukee County Historical Society," 15 May 1979.
- 32 Peace, "Deciding What to Save," p. 11. Richard J. Cox, "A Documentation Strategy Case Study: Western New York," *The American Archivist* 52 (Spring 1989), p. 195.
- 33 *Museums for a New Century*, p. 37. See also "Collecting for Tomorrow: Sweden's Contemporary Documentation Program," pp. 55-60.
- 34 "Filling the Gap," p. 151.
- 35 The following exemplifies the care with which one interviewer formulated documentation objectives for an interview dealing with labour history: "What were the worker's relationships to authority and how did this change? What was the role of leadership and to what extent did the leaders act or seem to act independently of their followers? How did the various groups of workers [understand] their struggle for power, and what impact did that struggle have upon their personal lives and personal outlooks?" David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Nashville, 1968), p. 133.
- 36 Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," pp. 116-17.
- 37 Boorstin, *Hidden History Exploring Our Secret Past*, p. xiv.
- 38 Marion Matters, "The Development of Common Descriptive Standards: Lessons from the Archival Community," *Spectra* (Summer 1990), p. 11.
- 39 Rudolph J. Vecoli, "'Diamonds in Your Own Backyard': Developing Documentation on European Immigrants to North America," *Ethnic Forum* 1 (September 1981), p. 2.
- 40 For further information, see Richard A. Erney and F. Gerald Ham, "Wisconsin's Area Research Centers," *American Libraries* 3 (February 1972), pp. 135-40; "Survey of Archival Networks," *Midwestern Archivist* VI, no. 2 (1982), pp. 120-23; Timothy L. Ericson, "Sharing the Wealth," *MRRS News* no. 2 (May 1980), pp. 1-4.
- 41 W. Kaye Lamb *et al.*, "Acquisitions Policy: Competition or Cooperation?" *Canadian Archivist*, 2, no. 1 (1970), pp. 21-22.
- 42 Boorstin, *Hidden History: Exploring Our Secret Past*, p. xv.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 *Ibid.*