FIRST PERSON, SINGULAR… FIRST PERSON, PLURAL:

Making Canada's Past Accessible

ABSTRACT

Ian Wilson attempts to put to rest the myth that Canadians have no interest in their own history. If Canadians seem to possess limited knowledge about their nation's history, they are "increasingly interested in history that is personal and individualized." This increase is visible in the number of virtual visitors who access The National Archives website – one of the Government of Canada's top ten most frequently visited. Indeed, the level of cybertraffic on the site suggests that Canadians do have considerable interest in exploring their past.

All of us at the conference have much in common and together have much at stake. As writers, teachers, researchers, librarians, archivists and other heritage specialists, we are attempting to make information and knowledge of our country and its past available and more accessible to Canadians. We are communicators with stories to tell. These stories are about who we are and how we came to be this way – as individuals, as communities, as organizations and institutions, and as Canadians. History is the collective body of these stories as expressed in writing and recollection, in image and anecdote, in sworn testimony and tall tale, and in the preserved evidence in our archives, libraries, museums and elsewhere.

We are all in the information business. Our greatest skill is in knowing how to turn information into knowledge. This intellectual alchemy is a process without which our history would be incomprehensible and patternless – some accidental or arbitrary alignment of time and opportunity, people and place. Our knowledge of ourselves and of the world requires not only access to accurate and reliable information, but it also requires context, observation, analysis, assessment and testing over time. Information becomes knowledge through a flash of insight, through reasoning and reflection and sometimes through learning that spans generations and millennia.

Every age and culture expresses its views about why chronicling the past is important and how best to do so. But nearly 2,500 years ago, Thucydides had pretty much figured it out. He thought about these issues as he wrote his monumental history of the Peloponnesian War and its terrible impact on every facet of Greek life[1]. Writing soon after the events occurred, he advised his readers that he did not write down the first story he heard, nor was he guided by his own opinions. "I was present myself," he tells us, "at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible."[2] These are the hallmarks of the vigorous, enquiring and objective mind. Our word "history" comes from the Greek verb, "to ask questions". Not even then was the truth easy to discover, he says. Different eyewitnesses gave different accounts of the same events, because of imperfect memories or partiality toward one side or the other. He also recognizes that some of his readers might not like what he has written because he has not romanticized the war between Athens and Sparta. This doesn't bother him. "My work," he says, "is not a piece of writing designed to meet the taste of an immediate public, but was done to last for ever."[3] And he tells us, with candor and common sense, why this is important: he will be happy "if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future."[4] It would be hard today to provide a better or wiser rationale for the writing and reading of history or for preserving the evidence of its passage.

Every generation leaves certain information and messages for the next … a kind of historical *paying it forward*. At the same time, each generation constantly re-evaluates the past, asking the same and new questions relevant to its concerns and future; seeking answers in the recorded memory of those who came before … *paying it back*, if you will. History is a dialogue between present and past with the voices and images of our predecessors still alive in the archives and in the books that they have bequeathed to us. This dialogue is inevitably informed, if not coloured, by views or concerns about a future. History is a complex, honest interplay of present, future and past. Mary Robinson (former President of Ireland and now UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) captured the essence of this dialogue when commenting on a research project on 19th century workhouses where

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so many Irish died: "... it is important, indeed imperative, that we the survivors, and future generations, should know about those who had no one to speak for them at the time of their greatest need and suffering. The story of the silent people should be heard."[5]

Our own age is more impatient than that of the Greeks' and less appreciative of the past. The lessons of history are often neglected in a technological environment which is squarely focused on the future. Even the techno-term "legacy systems" suggests the old and the useless, and "to archive" in computer terms suggests retention for no more than a few weeks.

The study of history requires effort and discipline. If we could label it, our history would surely carry the instructions "Some Assembly Required" and perhaps the additional warning "Contents Under Pressure".[6] It needs researchers, historians, film-makers, teachers and others who bring to it ideas and interpretation, vision and values. Ultimately, information becomes knowledge when an individual absorbs it, questions it and integrates it into his or her own experience. Through our professions and personal interests, all of us are trying to help this critical process take place for ourselves and for others.

Assembly is certainly required of the materials which archivists collect and care for. Sometimes these materials speak powerfully and on their own – for example, a striking photographic image or moving letter. Usually, however, they require others to link them together and interpret them, give them context and make them accessible. Unlike library and other published materials, archival records are usually original, unique and one-of-a-kind – "authorized but unedited," to be understood only in context of their creation and use. They need to be organized and described differently than library materials. There are many other differences, although they are beginning to blur as professional roles and definitions converge in the online information environment.

Archives are a fundamental source of information, evidence, knowledge and sometimes inspiration. The diaries and journals, the photographs, the paintings, the sounds and voices, the records of government, the maps and treaties – all of these collectively document the Canadian experience in its personal, social, economic, political, cultural and other dimensions. They are essential to identifying and understanding the issues, events, individuals and influences that shaped and often continue to affect that development. Archives constitute the legal evidence of what has happened.

Archives are the most cost-effective, comprehensive and concentrated way of preserving and making available authoritative information about our past. We can preserve only a few historical buildings and sites, but we can more readily preserve their architectural plans, their images, the recollections of their architects and builders and the stories of those who lived or worked in them.

The traditional view is that in the past, Canadians have been less interested in their history than other people. We were apparently content to accept the values, stories and myths of others rather than create our own. This reputed modesty and this reticence are yet another stereotype. Canadians know that in its overall shape our history is much like that of other nations – a mixture of the unique and the universal, the momentous and the minor with a generous sprinkling of genuine and would-be heroes. But it is *our* history, constituting an important part of *our* identity, as elusive as that identity sometimes seems. At its most inspiring, it is the stories of common people trying to learn from their experience and with courage and perseverance, accomplish uncommon things. Their stories provide a rich understanding of who they were as individuals, as families, as communities and as Canadians. Vincent Massey once said, "We don't have to make our history interesting. It *is* interesting."[7]

There is considerable evidence that Canadians want to know more about their past. Some of this evidence lies in the shifting age and demographic profile of Canadians. As the population ages, there is greater interest in learning about our personal and collective history. Genealogy is our fastest growing leisure-time pursuit. As well, five million people have immigrated to Canada since the end of the Second World War, largely from non-English and non-French speaking nations.[8] Canada today is a rich and diverse mix of peoples, many from cultures with a strong sense of identity and history. They are anxious to put down new roots and learn about Canada. They also want their own contributions to be recorded and remembered. Their stories must be added to those of other Canadians, including those of Canada's First Peoples. On September 1, 1905, the day that Alberta officially became a province, Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier addressed a huge crowd in Edmonton. "When I look about me," he declared, "I see everywhere hope, calm resolution, courage, enthusiasm to face all difficulties, to settle all problems. ... We do not anticipate, and we do not want, that any individuals should forget the land of their origin or their ancestors. Let them look to the past, but let them also look to the future; let them look to the land of their ancestors, but let them look also to the land of their children."[9]

Other factors influencing the appetite of Canadians for history include the explosion in information available via electronic media and, in particular, the Internet and related technologies. We live in the Information Age and the Digital Domain, we work in the Knowledge Economy, and we travel on the Information Highway searching, no doubt, for the next cyber-café. The information we have access to relates to every subject and to issues and events across a shrinking globe. Canadians now rank second in the world in terms of Internet use.[10] It is clear, however, that Canadians want to know who they are, where they came from and where they fit.

The growing awareness and interest in our history is evident in many ways: in the rising interest in genealogy, in new history and historical fiction writing, in television and film productions, in outstanding Canadian broadcast news and information programming, in Canadian history resources on the 'Net, and in imaginative school programs. When CBC's *Canada: A People's History* was aired in October of last year, it drew debut audiences of 3.26 million viewers, putting to rest, in the words of its producer, "the myth that Canadians are not interested in their history…"[11] The popularity of historical fiction, such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, is another example.

The National Archives contributed extensively to both of these projects.

Our experience in the National Archives confirms this rising tide of interest in Canada's past and who we are as Canadians – an often passionate belief that our history is relevant, interesting and often exciting. It can be seen daily in our Reading Room, in the activity on our Web site and in the flood of other requests for information from researchers.

When they find what they are searching for, they are often excited. One appreciative researcher wrote, "I received the details in this morning's post. A lot of disjointed facts I had all came together ... someone who was just a name to me is now a person …I know what [my grandfather] looked like, his age, where he was from ... it has been a strange day, a mixture of emotions; happiness at finding out about him and what he was like and sadness that he died [so young]." Another letter said, "I went to your Web site to look up information on my family history. Your site…brought me to tears. For there was a picture of the SS Metagama sailing into Quebec City in June 1927. My mom was on that ship on that day. She was 14 years old…[Her family] had left Belfast, Ireland, to homestead in Canada. [She] is now 88 years old and in good health."

While studies show that Canadians are weak on the facts of their nation's history, they are increasingly interested in history that is personal and individualized. People are searching for "my history", "my family" and "our home", "our community". This is history in the *first person, singular* and *first person, plural*.

Our staff works hard to connect Canadians to the sources of their past. Last year, more than 38,000 researchers visited the National Archives in person and we responded to 39,832 written requests for information, down slightly as more people locate information on our Web site. We produced 883,571 copies of documents from original and microfilmed sources, an increase of 15% over the previous year. I am also pleased that the breakdown of our researchers by age shows a fairly even distribution between 25 and 64, with the vast majority repeat visitors. We are seeing a more and better-informed audience who knows about our resources and who wants and expects convenient access to them.

Aside from assisting individual researchers – amateur and professional – we have developed and are planning a variety of programs and services to make Canada's history more accessible. Some are on-site; others are available in communities and schools, and more and more are accessible through the Internet. I would like to tell you about some of them.

In October 2001, we worked closely with the Famous 5 Foundation of Calgary and others to present events at the National Archives to coincide with the unveiling of the statue on Parliament Hill commemorating the Famous 5. You will recall that their efforts resulted in The Persons Case and the landmark legal decision in October 1929 on the rights and roles of Canadian women. One of the events was an exhibition based on our holdings and those of the National Library as well as the production of a booklet on The Persons Case. The booklet and other materials are available on our Web site.

For Black History Month this year, we marked the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. Together with members of the local Black community and colleagues from the National Library and other federal institutions, we produced a commemorative exhibition. It was complemented by the Ottawa premiere of a new NFB film on the struggle for Black civil rights in Canada, *Journey to Justice*.

Some of you may be aware of the education kit on Prime Ministers that we produced for school use in collaboration with Kodak Canada. The kit was designed to fit curricula in every province and is intended for youth aged 12 to 18. It includes lesson plans and activities reflecting a range of difficulty. It remains in high demand and is free of charge, with separate English and French versions available. About 3500 kits have been distributed to date.

I am also proud of another planned initiative. We recently collaborated with the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, various religious archives and the National Library to produce an exhibition – largely photographic – on residential schools. The exhibition opened in Ottawa on June 21, 2002 – National Aboriginal Day. The Foundation began touring a circulating version on the same day, and a virtual version has been placed on the Foundation's Web site and linked to the National Archives site. Aside from this initiative, our records relating to the Residential Schools have played a major part in understanding this complex chapter in Canadian history. In the Archives you will find the full story of Canada, our successes and failures, our hopes and worries as a society over the course of decades and centuries.

I would also like to mention the 3D Virtual Buildings project which was developed by the National Research Council in conjunction with Industry Canada's SchoolNet program. We provided archival content on the study and re-creation of heritage buildings and supplied other material on how best to access and make use of archival resources.

The Portrait Gallery of Canada offers visitors an unparalleled chance to see Canadians from all walks of life who have helped to create and tell our stories and build our country, as well as of those whose lives continue to enrich us. The Gallery is part of the National Archives and is housed in a renovated heritage building in Ottawa. We will be assembling works for exhibition from our extensive portrait holdings, comprising some 20,000 paintings and drawings, four million photographs and 10,000 medals and philatelic works. Through its activities on-site and online, the Gallery puts faces to Canadian history.

The foundation for the Archives' public programming activities and its new Web products is its extraordinary collection built up over 129 years of documenting Canada. This now represents more than 150 kilometers of records – or the equivalent of the distance from Winnipeg to Portage la Prairie. Our Internet initiative will help deliver the Government of Canada's commitment to increase the level of Canadian content available on the Internet in both English and French. Under the leadership of the Honourable Sheila Copps, the Department of Canadian Heritage is funding a wide range of on-line initiatives intended to enhance Canadians' knowledge of where they

come from and to strengthen their sense of citizenship. One such initiative is our *Canadian Memory* program which makes available on the Web a rich sampling of authentic primary historical resources in all media from our collections. These documents and images are available via ArchiviaNet, our main online research tool. An example is the Canadian Expeditionary Forces database which includes the names of the more than 600,000 men and women who served during the First World War, as well as over 200,000 of their Attestation papers . This has allowed countless Canadians to research the role of family members in the War. We have also re-structured ArchiviaNet to provide simpler links and a continuously developing view of the National Archives' holdings.

We have also been working closely with other Canadian institutions to expand access to our country's network of archival resources. Today, the Canadian Archival Information Network (CAIN) is accessible on the Internet, providing a gateway to the holdings of over 800 participating institutions. Through its links to these institutions, CAIN offers searchable access to thousands of records and collection level descriptions as well as access to digital images and to virtual exhibits. CAIN will make Canadian archives accessible at one Internet address and provide researchers – amateur and professional alike – with a major portal to information about the past.

The Internet is transforming the way we serve our clients. The National Archives Web site demonstrates daily that there has never been greater access by Canadians to information about their country's history or greater interest in exploring it. Since the launch of the site – one of the Government of Canada's top ten most frequently visited – many Canadians are discovering for the very first time the extent and detail of the information gathered in the Archives since 1872. This year, the number of user sessions on the Archives Web site exceeded 1.5 million. At the same time, on-site use increased and demand for copies of certain records highlighted on our Web site doubled.

The Web's impact on the profile of the researcher has been particularly gratifying. In the past, most users of the National Archives have been experienced researchers and often professionals. With more and more information online and easily searchable, we are seeing an extraordinary increase in interest and use by ordinary Canadians. Although not always successful, searching the past is now something that Canadians can do – anytime, any place, anywhere. No archive has ever experienced this kind of very direct and public use. The Internet is changing archives from the least accessible heritage institution to the most accessible and expanding the demand for information by Canadians about themselves, their families, their communities and their country. Technology is finally enabling us to do what archivists have wanted to do for decades: to share the genuine records and authentic voices of our past with a broad public.

Archives, like other heritage organizations, are learning to communicate with and serve their audiences better with the help of the Internet. Imaginative new ways of presenting their resources are being developed by institutions used to focusing on the physical rather than the virtual visitor. They are both very real and they are out there waiting – *patiently*, in line and, *impatiently*, online.

Technology is also allowing those of you who are teachers to access and make greater use in the classroom of authentic historical materials from the National Archives and other sources. Teaching plans and projects can be built around the diverse range of resources on our Web site and available through the CAIN gateway. And if there are other materials in our own collections or different approaches that you would like to see, I hope that you will tell me or talk to staff members at the National Archives booth. We want to know what your needs are and will do our best to respond to them.

Clearly, the e-world is changing our individual lives and every one of our professions. It is breaking down barriers and stereotypes that have limited our reaching out to one another. We need to recognize these changes and accept them, using the new tools to respond to the growing desire by Canadians for the authentic stories of their past. Together, we can reshape the teaching of history by enabling all generations of Canadians to have first-hand experience, in schools and at home, with the documents and images that provide testimony to the Canadian experience. History is indeed at a crossroads, and isn't it exciting to be part of the community that will make it live for this and for future generations of Canadians.

Notes

[1] 431-404 B.C.

[2] Thucydides, The Peloponnesian War, Penguin Classics, Baltimore, 1965 (Translated by Rex Warner)

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Mary Robinson, Keynote Address, International Conference on Hunger, New York University, May 19, 1995.

[6] Christopher Hitchens drew a similar analogy in his November 1998 article in *Harper's Magazine* on the teaching of American history.

[7] The Right Honourable Charles Vincent Massey (1887-1967), Governor General of Canada, 1952-1959; quoted in *Colombo's Canadian Quotations*

[8] Estimated, based on Statistics Canada data.

[9] Quoted in the *Toronto Globe*, September 2, 1905, page 1.

[10] Angus Reid Group, 2000

[11] Catherine Dawson March, "The Next Chapter," *Globe Television Magazine*, September 29-October 6, 2001