LOOKING WEST … LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

ABSTRACT

In May 2004, the Canadian government passed new legislation which opened up 130 years of active collecting at Library and Archives Canada to the public. The Internet and web technology have revolutionized access to information. As more and more of the LAC's holdings go online, Canadians will be able to access their heritage from their homes, offices and even their palm pilot.

IAN E. WILSON

In 2004, Mr. Ian E. Wilson was appointed Librarian and Archivist of Canada in Library and Archives Canada. He had been appointed National Archivist of Canada in July 1999 and with the National Librarian Roch Carrier developed and led the process to create a new knowledge institution for Canada in the 21st century.

Anniversaries are a time for reflection; a time to critically evaluate our past accomplishments and initiate serious debate as to where we would like to go in the future. This September marked the centennial of the admission of Alberta and Saskatchewan as provinces in Confederation, a significant chapter in Canada's development as a nation from sea to sea to sea. As students, teachers, writers, researchers, curators, librarians, and archivists we feel that the Alberta-Saskatchewan anniversary is unique and worthy of remembrance and commemoration. We would like to see it – and many other anniversaries – become a permanent part of Canada's social fabric. As chroniclers of the past, we recognize that it is only by understanding our shared past in all its complexity and diversity can we prepare to address the serious challenges of our future. This understanding depends in very large measure on the thoughts, the images, the creativity and the wide range of experience enshrined in the books, records and holdings of our libraries and archives.

Provincial centennials, with their countless exhibitions, books, encyclopedias and speeches, all requiring authoritative content, are also a celebration of the contributions made by generations of librarians and archivists to provincial society. Their efforts have enabled and informed these celebrations. Our generation has inherited the unique, often fragile, and engaging holdings gathered and preserved by our predecessors. Our challenge is to ensure that this multi-media record reflects all aspects of our collective past, the good and the regretted, to add to it, to ensure it is available as the recorded social memory, and then to preserve it for the future. We are the stewards of a vital social asset. The depth and meaning of this asset is but little known and seldom used. We have a responsibility to ensure our holdings are a public asset, available to as broad a public as possible, at least as far as technology and the imperative of preservation allow. Information technology has finally caught up with our ambition, providing us with an unprecedented opportunity to open our stacks and shelves to all Canadians.

Our goal at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) is to become a leading-edge knowledge institution for the 21st century. Building on the traditions and expertise of the former National Library of Canada (established 1953) and the National Archives of Canada (established 1872), staff have worked diligently over the past two years, not only to re-organize our work, but to re-think what it is we do and why. Although there is still much to be done in this transformation, our objectives remain clear: to create a truly national institution that provides Canadians with access to the whole of their documentary heritage.

When our new legislation was passed by Parliament on May 21, 2004, it introduced a new concept: the documentary heritage of Canada. This is an all-inclusive term for the extraordinary material gathered over 130 years of active collecting. It includes nearly 19 million books, periodicals, newspapers, microfilms and government publications; approximately 156 km of unique textual records; over 20 million photographs; 350,000 works of art; 1.5 million maps, architectural drawings, and engineering plans; gigabytes of electronic publications and official records; and an outstanding collection of film, video, sound recordings and broadcasts; as well as music, stamps, editorial cartoons, posters and pamphlets. The collection is a Canadian treasure and arguably the most valuable asset, certainly one of the most fragile, owned by the people of Canada.

The new legislation will allow us to be proactive in making these unique and fragile resources known and available to all Canadians, offering them unparalleled access to our rich and diverse collections. The demand is evident. In April and May we tripled our Web capacity; use has grown 78 per cent in less than a year and this summer there were periods when there were 15 downloads

per second from the LAC Web site. We are developing sophisticated information architecture and systems to ensure that this happens. We want to meet the information needs of Canadians with multi-channel services on site or via the Internet with digital content, virtual reference, and, soon, digitization on demand. LAC will be a prime learning destination, a lead institution in information and knowledge management.

Access to our collections has been one of the drivers in the creation of the new institution. We are developing strategic approaches to description and metadata. Bibliographic records are absolutely essential for the integrity and control of the collection; archival descriptive practices are well developed and through this, the evidential and contextual values are maintained. These are important and necessary, but they are not access points. Librarians and archivists are looking at this very issue, and the challenge is to develop another layer of description that will provide easy access to all of our holdings for all of our users. The future is digitization. Internet and Web technology have revolutionized access to information and as more and more of our holdings go online, Canadians will be able to access their heritage as never before, in their homes, in their offices, in the palms of their hands. None of this will be possible without a renewed leadership and a strategic focus that brings together libraries, archives and partners all across Canada.

Through programs for schools and youth, the Canadian Genealogy Centre, the Portrait Gallery of Canada and virtual exhibitions, we have been developing innovative programs that will help make our documentary heritage better known to Canadians. To meet this priority we also need to take advantage of Web-based technologies so as to bring our diverse holdings together under a single research portal. It has become increasingly clear that our users are looking for easier access to our collections, not just in a physical sense but intellectually as well. A single research portal that takes advantage of descriptive standards and database design will eliminate many of the media-based information silos that archivists and librarians originally developed in the 19th century. While this approach may have served the research community well over the last century, information silos will not work in the virtual world of the 21st century.

However, if we are to create a truly national institution that provides Canadians with unparalleled access to the whole of their documentary heritage, much still remains to be done. Our collections may be the most extensive in the country, but they are complemented by essential heritage resources held in smaller libraries and archives across the country. To some extent we are well along the path to developing integrated systems that provide educators, students and researchers with unfettered access to documents. Archives Canada (www.archivescanada.ca) and AMICUS (www.collectionscanada.ca/amicus) have been major achievements in bringing together the bibliographic descriptions of the heritage collections from a wide array in institutions. Both sites are now the envy of many countries. LAC has also tapped into the strengths of a number of provincial institutions in its virtual exhibitions to provide more comprehensive and rounded stories. The Canadian Century Research Infrastructure (CCRI) assisted us with the digitization of the 1911 census; Canada Post enabled us to develop a philatelic site recognized as one of the best in the world, and Public History Inc., contributed to the digitization of the central registry of the Department of Indian Affairs.

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If LAC's collections could be brought together with libraries, archives and museums in western Canada, the magnitude of this documentary resource would be almost unimaginable. Readers of this journal are well aware that, historically, Ottawa's relationship with the Prairie West was unlike that of the other provinces. The early development of the region – even long after it had obtained provincial status – was largely controlled from Ottawa with federal institutions, such as the Department of the Interior, retaining control over the allocation of land and natural resources. This relationship had a significant impact of the archival record, with many of the region's historical documents being retained in federal institutions, while others were divided up and scattered across the three Prairie Provinces (see Terry Cook, "The Canadian West: An Archival Odyssey through the Records of the Department of the Interior," at www.collectionscanada.ca/04/042426_e.html). In the new Web world, it is possible to bring these widely dispersed heritage resources back together, reconstituting the documentary heritage of a region and providing the vital context for the innumerable local histories prepared by enthusiastic communities.

Reconnecting such a vital resource on the Web would provide unprecedented access to a documentary heritage that was previously only available to professional researchers with time and financial support to undertake the necessary travel. Think of the possibilities of a single research portal providing unrestricted access to the posters, pamphlets, and films that enticed European immigrants to make the Prairie West their home; the letters, internal memoranda, and departmental reports documenting federal policies on the disposition of homestead lands; the reports of the federal inspectors who visited homesteaders to ensure that federal regulations had been followed; the 700,000 land

patents issued by the federal government to confirm the transfer of homestead lands from the Crown to individual farmers and ranchers; the published annual reports summarizing the government's year-to-year progress in its attempt to make an agricultural paradise out of the region; and the local newspapers and personal diaries, letters, photographs recounting family experiences as they wrestled with the naked prairie landscape to make a home. These heritage documents currently exist in repositories under federal, provincial and local governments. On their own, the records have historical merit; collectively in Web world they would form a significant and lasting contribution to Canada's strategic agenda as a knowledge-based society.

Acquisition, descriptions, preservation and access are at the core of our professions. These skills have renewed importance in the 21st Century as our citizens seek reliable, authentic information about our country and depend on us to ensure that the transitory creations of electronic systems last beyond tomorrow. We need to put in place comprehensive, shared approaches to ensure the careful selection and preservation of the range of documentary media. We need a Canadian digital information strategy to coordinate the many digitization efforts and to ensure the long-term preservation of our digital documentary heritage, from broadcasts to email to data. LAC is firmly committed to working with libraries and archives and museums across the country to advance this common agenda. We, too, need to understand and build on our past achievements as we address the challenges of the 21st Century. And, echoing a key approach to the success of Saskatchewan and Alberta, our efforts must be co-operative.