January 1975

The Necessity of Education

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Ottawa City Archives

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Some of the best archivists that I have known on both sides of the Atlantic had no formal training in archives. They had become archivists almost by accident after training as librarians, historians and for other more unlikely professions. They did not agree about the operation of an archives (and I would not always agree with them either), but they had clearly thought about the tasks ahead and established working solutions. On this basis I might almost agree that training is unnecessary, until I remember that the worst archivists I have known also had no formal training. There were those who devised incomprehensible and unworkable systems of arranging documents; those who mixed the contents of several separate archive groups to the confusion of future historians; and those who, in England, thought that any document younger than 1888 was of no value whatever.

I cannot recollect any archivist with some professional training who reached these depths. There may be some inefficient qualified archivists, but at least they know the rudiments of accepted practices and can usually be trusted to follow someone's "system" blindly to a moderately good solution. As graduates of archive training courses grow older, we shall probably see another generation of good archivists—a third generation of the same calibre as Hilary Jenkinson, Ernst Posner or W. Kaye Lamb. This, then, is the first basic argument for education. We shall be spared an influx of charlatans and cranks if there is a standard of training established for archivists.

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More important still, the archives themselves will be spared the onslaught of such people in the future. At the present time, anyone with a degree in history thinks that he has achieved good results by arranging all the papers in chronological order, or, if he has a degree in library science, by arranging them in subject order according to Dewey or the Library of Congress.

But the necessity of education goes much further than this. If archivists are ever to achieve professional status in the eyes of laymen, then they must have a standard qualification as a means of distinguishing themselves from those who are only archivists in title. The administrator, the historian and the owner of archives cannot judge whether a person is trained as an archivist, or whether an assessor is capable of judging an archivist's qualifications. When an employer chooses someone for a professional position, he looks for a degree, a diploma, or a certificate at least, to assure himself of obtaining professional competence. At the present time, it is very difficult to find archivists who possess such paper qualifications. It is not surprising that employers issue badly-worded advertisements for archivists, or assign the posts to ancient employees or superior filing clerks. Employers are not to blame for this. We are, because we have no public standards by which we can be judged.

There is another, less public, reason for education. Education is contact and discussion with other people of the same interests. It is shared problems and shared solutions. Most conference-attenders know that the most important parts of a conference are the chats over a cup or glass in the evenings. One or two of the papers read at a conference may be of particular interest to an individual, but more true education comes from discussion and argument about archival problems. Training courses which bring archivists with different backgrounds together are of great value to everyone. They are particularly worthwhile for archivists who work alone or in small offices where the opportunities for discussion are very limited.

Most of the training available on this side of the Atlantic is to be found either in short, intensive courses which usually are restricted to practising archivists, or in special lectures which constitute part of a course for some other qualification. In the absence of other forms of training, these courses can be considered
better than nothing. Most of their organisers already recognise the defects of what they are trying to do, and are attempting to improve the training they provide. The danger is that we shall become content with inadequate training, that the public and the universities will come to believe that such training is all that is needed, and that the graduates of such courses will emerge thinking that they know "all about archives" after thirty hours of lectures.

The situation in Europe is somewhat better, because more adequate training is available. Perhaps the oldest and most highly developed courses are in France and Germany. The Ecole des Chartes in Paris takes four years to train an archiviste paléographe. All students must be college graduates and pass an entrance examination. The course for Archive-Assessor at the Bavarian School of Archives takes only three years, but normally requires a doctorate. Both courses are concerned with all aspects of archival science, and neither appears to include practical work. The training for an archivist-historian at the Copernicus University in Poland also lasts three years but includes practical work in the university vacation. The British courses probably are the shortest in Europe, lasting only one year. But there is general agreement that this is too short a period for basic training and lengthy discussions are in progress on ways to add extra subjects to an overcrowded curriculum. Palaeography, sigillography and similar subjects are losing their old importance in European training, and their places are being taken by courses in the uses of computers and audio-visual archives. Though courses are becoming more like those needed in North America, the European institutions lack a sufficiency of student-places in the universities and offer no continuing education for archivists.

If archivists in North America are ever to achieve professional standing, then they must get established, by some means or other, several basic training courses for young archivists, which produce graduates of a recognised standing and which last at least one academic year. Several courses are required to serve different regions and to provide some variety of content and teaching. The advantages which appear to arise from one centralised course in Washington or Ottawa are fallacious. A course in either of these places inevitably would be dominated.

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by its national archives. I have very great respect for both institutions, but they are no more the repositories of all archival wisdom than the Public Record Office or the Archives Nationales. An even greater danger is that with a limited number of staff and students, the teaching of a centralised course might well become inbred and formalised to an impossible degree. The existence of alternative courses is the best remedy for this. Diversity is an advantage in teaching. The existence in England of two training courses which were originally based on different concepts and philosophies undoubtedly has stimulated and improved both courses.

Above all, we should try to avoid the malaise which has haunted much of the training of librarians. The emphasis in most library schools has been on formal training. Books are catalogued according to a set of rules which cannot be altered or amended to suit local circumstances. These rules are taught more by rote than as a set of logical principles to be applied with common sense. It may be necessary to teach librarians in this way in order that every library from Salem to San Francisco has it biography of Huey Long in the same place. It would be most dangerous to train archivists in this manner—as a cursory examination of the French national system of classifying archives, wherein every departmental archives has to use exactly the same rigid arrangement for its records as the Archives Nationales in Paris, will reveal. Archivists must inevitably be people who think. And if they are to reach professional status, then their education must teach them to think. It is time we began to provide that training.