

Archives in the Revenue Stream

By Reuben Ware

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Reuben Ware
#5- 691 Frankhill Road
R.R. 2, Peterborough ON
K9J 6X3 CANADA

Tel: 705-748-9944
E-mail: rware44@yahoo.com

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Today I want to talk about two aspects of archives. I want to (1) outline what happened in British Columbia to the provincial archives in November 2002 and suggest some of the impacts this may have on historical research and (2) explore the wider context in which this event occurred and the forces in today's world that seem to be overwhelming archives, especially public archives.

Part 1: The Demolition of the BC Archives

Last years demolition of the BC Archives raised many issues about the role of archives in society, the nature of government archives, archives links to records management, and the administration of document disposal, privacy, and freedom of information. These are serious issues and the developing situation needs to be monitored closely. Monitored, both so that pressure can be placed to mitigate the worst effects, and so that the first opportunity to undo the damage can be seized and the integrity of British Columbia's public archives can be restored.

There also needs to be attention given to impacts this action will have on the various types of users of the BC Archives, one of the main groups being land claims and aboriginal rights researchers. This presentation only highlights some of the factors that impact on researchers. It is not exhaustive and is more in the nature of a call for a thorough treatment and analysis by those who will be directly affected. Some of these factors are:

- **Loss of profile for archival programs.**
- **Scrapping of the Community Archives Assistance Program.**
- **Discontinuation of transfer of records to local archives.**

- **Disconnecting the Records Life Cycle: impeding the flow of government archives from Ministry records management programs to the BC Archives.**
 - **Loss of a critical mass of staff and resources that could be allocated or re-allocated as archives, not museum priorities, dictate.**
 - **Over-emphasis on display and archival exhibits to the detriment of the expansion of archival holdings and improvement in access to them.**
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- **Loss of profile for archival programs.**

We have gone from a flagship archives to one that is part of a museum mandate. What we had was a world-class program recognized and emulated by other provinces and programs in other countries.

- **Scrapping the Community Archives Assistance Program.**

The first blow at the BC Archives and province-wide archival services was the hacking of the Community Archives Assistance Program [CAAP] from the 2002-03 budget. When the Provincial Archives of British Columbia and the Records Management Branch were integrated in 1989, one of the top priorities was to develop local and community archives in BC through a meaningful funding program. The Provincial archives could not do everything nor acquire everything; it needed a strong and vibrant archives community. This idea was fundamental to the expansion of archives available to the research community. CAAP was inaugurated to strengthen acquisition and preservation by private and local archives and to build a strong archival base throughout the Province.

Now this program is gone and Provincial funds for local archives have dried up. This will negatively affect the quality of archives resources available to historians. The restoration of this program is a fundamental part of nurturing a Provincial-wide archives network. Any organization, no matter how poorly conceived, that replaces the BC Archives should restore this grant program as quickly as possible. Without it, research resources for all users – historians, genealogists, land claims researchers – are lessened.

Some have criticized the BC archives as giving too much emphasis to government records and now argue that the new organization will redress the imbalance between government and non-government records. But this criticism of past BC Archives programs belies a misunderstanding, or misstatement, of the intention of the Community Archives Assistance Program [CAAP]. The fundamental purpose of this program was to build a network for non-government records. This effort had three essential components: (1) a long-term funding program to establish and strengthen local and special archives to be full partners with the BC Archives, (2) a common database or union list of holdings, and (3) a provincial-wide acquisition plan.

The funding program, CAAP, did much good in its ten-year history, but there is much that still needs to be done. The common database was also established and is part of the

British Columbia Archival Information Network, or BCAIN. BCAIN [See, <http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/bcain.html>] is a portal, or gateway, to archives and archival resources in BC. It "provides access to archival descriptions on the BC Archival Union List, information about archival institutions and links to web sites, virtual displays, and online historical photograph databases maintained by archives around the province."

There has been tremendous development of archives in BC in the last 15 years. Many new archives have been established and older ones have grown and been strengthened. Many nodes of an archival system are there already, but they need to be connected, and coordinated in their operations. One key thing that is lacking in this provincial archives network is a coordinated acquisition strategy with specific plans identifying subjects, persons, groups, topics, regions, time-frames of BC's history that are important for acquisition. Then the plan would assign responsibility for each type of record to a certain archives or groups of archives. Once CAAP was running, the BC Archives should have led the development of this plan and nurtured its implementation. The success of this plan was not only important to the growth of community archives; it was fundamental to the systematic expansion of archival resources and access to them for users of all kinds. The BC Archives should have been a major partner in the plan and accepted responsibility for major blocks of acquisitions.

This was an egregious shortfall, and a very sad one because it was unnecessary. What is particularly worrisome is those responsible for this shortfall over the past ten years are now blaming it on the over-emphasis on government records. Rather than take responsibility for their own short-sightedness and their failure to allocate the resources to develop a province-wide archives system and to improve the acquisition of non-government archives, they imply that somehow the fault lies with government archives and records management. And they now suggest that the Crown Trust will fix this by acquiring archives related to society's under-represented groups. That in itself is fine, but insufficient. What is still needed is a coordinated provincial strategy that has a detailed plan, participation by the archives community, and is funded.

- **Discontinuation of transfer of records to local archives.**

In the recent issue of the AABC Newsletter [Volume 13, no.1, *Provincial Archivist Report*], the director of the archives in the Crown Trust [the term used for the integrated Royal BC Museum and the remnant of the old BC Archives] announces that several repatriation programs have been placed on hold. The repatriation program involved transferring archival holdings – like local government records, regional and district records of Provincial departments, and records of local interest – from the BC Archives to community archives, and it was an important extension to the Community Archives Assistance Program. It could be a method to increase resources for archival holdings and to expand availability to them. At this point, it is important to clarify the status of this program. Will it be continued and will funds be available to support the repatriations? And are the records being imaged or digitized before their transfer to local archives?

• Disconnecting the Records Life Cycle: impeding the flow of government archives from Ministry records management programs to the BC Archives

Government records have always been one of the main types of documentation used at the BC Archives and, in this, there was operational symmetry because the actual mandate of the BC Archives is to be the archives of the Government. Records management was a natural and essential extension. Improving the flow of archival government records and improving access for users was one of the motivations for the Archives to get involved and play a leading part in the development of the records management program in the first place. Since the mid-1980's this involvement had direct benefit for research users. But now management of the records life cycle is truncated, thereby making it more difficult to assure the identification and preservation of government archives. Over time, this may have a profound and negative effect on history and research of all types. It could mean some important records are not preserved and delay transfers to the archives.

The flow of archival records from Ministries to the archives has also been jeopardized by a recent decision to charge-back the Ministries for the cost of records storage with Records Centre Services. The Records Centre program provides a way station storing both records destined for destruction and archival records slated for preservation by the archives. This program was established in 1983 and has been a major part of the success of BC's records management program. Charge-back means that Ministries will tend hold and stash their records in attics, closets, basements, and other unsuitable places. This not only places them in jeopardy of damage or destruction, but delays access to them. What is one of the best ways to destroy a records management program, to place archival records at risk, and to reduce the archival records available to researchers? Do what the government has just done - institute charge-back for records storage.

Splitting the records continuum is a regressive act that sets archives in British Columbia back 15 years or more. This split organization will have difficulty in administering records management and in fulfilling the Archives' responsibilities under privacy and access to information statutes. I think also that the Government will soon realize to its detriment, and possibly its embarrassment, that its ability to administer these laws, as well as the *Document Disposal Act*, has been grossly impaired.

But the stakes for archives are far greater than this. Integrated oversight of the records life cycle is now lost in the British Columbia Government and effective management of the records continuum will be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. Now that this unified archives and records management organization has been shattered, two models of contemporary archival practice -- the record continuum and the records life cycle -- have been pushed to the periphery. At least there is no single organization that encompasses them in an unbroken chain. This should concern us all, even those who see this as some kind of opportunity to cooperate with museums or get back to historical manuscript collecting. This situation is a strategic blow to archives, not just the tweaking of priorities.

These two factors – a truncated life cycle and charge-back for records storage – are not merely government management or technical issues. Good access depends on good record-keeping in Ministries and systematic overview of Government's records life-cycle.

One key area that is will be affected by this take-over is the challenge of electronic records and their preservation as electronic archives. Without exaggeration I think this challenge can be termed monumental and the new organization platform that has been erected will make this task even harder and the goal more elusive. The long-term affect of failing on this issue could have a devastating impact on archives of the future.

- **Loss of a critical mass of staff and resources that could be allocated or re-allocated as archives, not museum priorities, dictate.**

It should deeply concern all researchers that the Province's main public archives has lost the ability to plan for and concentrate resources and staff on its own initiative. It can no longer focus its critical mass on preservation and availability of archival records and on services for the users of these records.

Some argue that now the archives will find new groups of users and revenue that it never had before. This is a big stretch, and the revenue part is a kind of recurring Treasury Board mania unsupported by market surveys or studies of potential user groups, not to mention surveys of the needs of current users. The Cabinet presentation of the CEO of the Royal BC Museum given at the outset of this amalgamation is replete with Business and Business Case terminology and one gets the idea that Business is somehow what this is about. I am skeptical, but what I would expect is that if we are to get the Business over this amalgamation, at least we should get some good business. What we get instead is very bad business, poorly supported and based on deep misunderstandings of archives and their role in society.

A public archives is not a business, it is a service with a mission is to preserve and serve. Currently it is getting dragged into tangential things not directly related to its function. Even the business model has the principle emphasizing the importance of focusing on the things you do and do well and not avoid side-lines. Not only has this new regime put the archives on the side-line, it is taking it away from its primary focus. Ironically, the archives is also a side-line for the museum and will always be so.

Some suggest that this move will be good for administrative efficiency and strengthen common services, but this is common rhetoric for government managers whenever there is a "re-organization." And the minor gains from administrative improvements, if there are any, are greatly off-set by the damage that will be done to Government's archival functions.

Others offer up the possibility of fund-raising under the aegis of the Crown Trust as a justification, or at least a mitigation, of the Museum take-over. But surely a way could have been found for the BC Archives to benefit by fund-raising and sponsorship on its own so that non-government records and community archives programs were directly benefited. My question is, did they even try?

- **Over-emphasis on display and archival exhibits to the detriment of the expansion of archival holdings and improvement in access to them.**

This shift in emphasis has many implications and raises a variety of issues for the researchers. The expenditure of resources on exhibits and other museum-type programs rather than expanded holdings and access to archives will have a negative effects. Services to researchers will, over the longer term, deteriorate as archives scrambles for its place in a bureaucratic pecking order that is alien to it. But there are wider, deeper issues at stake here with more serious consequences that may result from the submersion of archives into the museum environment. It is not just budget reductions or profile down-grading, but potential shifts in the very nature of archives, documentary evidence, and research.

The BC Archives has now entered into a museum and exhibit world with a far different mind-set than that of research and historical documentation. The emphasis on public programming and revenue generation threatens to turn the Archives into a tourist kiosk. Researchers, I think [at least I did when I was a land claim researcher] want to see and research the entire series of records [for example land settlement subject files, water rights applications, or land registry deeds] or they want a specific file or document on a specific topic, name, or item; they do not want an exhibit of the types of deeds or a physical reconstruction of a land registry office. Or, they want a photograph of *the* specific reserve or family being researched, not a selection of settler family photographs included in an exhibit or website. The museum notion turns primary source documents into secondary information-bytes; it turns evidence into presentation that is subjective, selective, and interpretive. The kiosk approach makes both broad-based survey research and specific item search difficult, if not impossible. In the place of research as we know it, we are given info-tainment. We may be given a kind of web-based mass access to parts of the archival record. But remember, it is only a selected portion of that record, and, for the most part, the content of that selection is much more subject to interpretation and manipulation by the Crown Trust.

As land claims researchers, what do you want? Slick video presentations of an officially sanctioned "cultural memory," or direct and open access to the case files of the Indian Reserve Commission or the Provincial Fish and Game Branch. As Native researchers or as those dedicated to working for Native communities, what do you trust? Your own research and agenda and your own long, hard searches, or the Crown Trusts' programmed selection.

In the words of the director of the archives under the Crown Trust, the archive will be in the Cultural Precinct's Living Landscape and part of its "showcase for displaying...the

culture(s) and history of our province.” But an archives is not a showcase, it is a storehouse. It is neither bombast for politicians, nor glitter for troupes of tourists. Rather it is a holding place for the preservation and use of the evidence and memory of past activities and contexts. It is not a cultural precinct; it is a sanctuary of functions and documented actions. Archives are not a “Landscape,” Living or otherwise. They are the bedrock, subsoil and geological substance for all the landscapes. Conflating the nature, role, and services of archives with the exhibit mentality is a disservice.

There are other misunderstandings about the nature and importance of archives in the Cabinet presentation and the other announcements of the take-over. For example, one of the press releases implies that the archives has a role in “Celebrating Royalty.” But archives do not “celebrate” anything, they just exist as evidence and documentation. True, they document the acquisition values, appraisal criteria, and hierarchies of the societies that created them and the elites of that society, but they exist as a celebration in their own right, in their authenticity, their raw physical forms, and in whatever states of completeness that may have survived. Those that use archives can celebrate royalty or anything else they might like, but those responsible for them have a different mission and a set of functions based on the records themselves. And if the evidence, documentation, and information in our archives do celebrate anything, I would suggest it is rather the Canadian people and parliamentary democracy than the Royals.

Indeed, there is an atmosphere surrounding the take-over that challenges some of the key archival values our profession has embraced in the last three decades. This new approach treats archives as entertainment, as programmatic celebration, and as virtual experience, rather than as evidence and documentation. Others have discussed the “kiosking” of archives, both the pro’s and con’s of it. I am not completely sure myself; it seems like a good form of outreach, but I can’t see it remaking archives and it may turn archives into a kind of post-modern wallpaper. I did look up the word “virtual” in my dictionary and it means ‘seeming so in essence or effect but not being so in fact.’ This is all right for advertising or promoting archives, but it is not hard-core archives and it is not useful to the things land claims researchers need of archives. You don’t need wall-paper, you need to be able to take the wall down.

I do know that programmatic display is not the same thing as access to archives. One is derived presentation; the other is availability of authentic evidence. One is produced as entertainment; the other is preserved in accordance with standards and an archival code of ethics. Even the slickest of the Hollywood display-men get this right – when the crew on *Star Trek* wanted to find evidence of a past action, status, event or activity, they didn’t go to the Holo-Deck, they accessed the Archives. What concerns me, and should worry others, is that with the demolition of the B.C. Archives and other recent developments on the Canadian archives scene, we seem to be on our way to the Holo-Deck.

I suggest that these two approaches, now struggling for hegemony, are mutually exclusive, and pose many questions for all researchers, including those working on First Nations’ issues. There are questions about how a researcher approaches his/her subject

and how archives are available and presented - questions about the role of historian in society. Is the historical researcher to be another type of exhibit curator or website fashioner? One thing for sure, more showcase goo-gahs will mean less hard-core archival resources, in their contextual completeness, available to researcher of all types. For First Nations research, do you want to be in the Archives or the Holo-Deck?

Summary of Part 1

Land claims and aboriginal rights researchers, indeed all users of archives deserve a full-fledged, fully coordinated archives system. Doing what has been done with archives programs in the past year is NOT the way to get such a system. The program confusion in evidence in the Cultural Precinct, tangled explanations of past practices and poor priority-setting, and the fact that there is no "Total Archives" left in Victoria to lead us to this system make it all the less likely that we will see one.

Coordination of a province-wide program and administration of records management has been made exceedingly difficult.

The deeper damage to archives is not likely to occur from the fact that one type of heritage organization has taken over another – though this may be bad enough. Greater dismay is due to the facts that (1) a business mentality has taken over a public service philosophy and (2) an archival commitment to the preservation of documentary evidence has been taken over by an interpretive, programmatic orientation.

Part 2. Archives in the Revenue Stream.

Last month at a governmental review, a manager of a public service program was asked by an annoyed ministerial assistant, a recent neo-conservative appointee, "Where is your revenue stream?" The manager replied, "Well sir, the only possible revenue stream is the clients and they can't afford it, they have no money for fees, that's why they are in this program."

A take-over like that of the BC Archives does not happen in a vacuum or at the whim of neo-conservative Cabinet ministers, although whims and ideologies played their part in this event. This happened in a wider context and as a result of bigger forces at work in the society at large. It is an example, a case study, of some of the sociological and economic trends occurring today. I would like to share some of my observations and concerns about some of these changes and to indicate some of what I think we can look for in the years ahead. Today, there is only time to sketch these developments, but perhaps some of them would be worthy of sessions at future workshops.

Some of the developments, though they have deeper roots, are more directly associated and have direct effects on archives programs and archival research. Some you will be

very well aware of and have been occurring for a decade or more. Not all have happened at the BC Archives or the Crown Trust, but some have. They are issues that directly affect your ability to do research.

- Amalgamations and Take-overs
- Closures and Reductions
- Freedom of Information or Formalization of Access
- Privacy
- Copyright
- Special Categories of Users
- Fees
- Web-based Exhibit or Web-based Access

There are also deeper forces at work. Some of these forces:

- **Commercialization of Programs**
Turn functions and programs into market-driven activities and commercial transactions, i.e. "business," that can be advertised, based in fees that can be collected, or transferred to the private sector. This is not just rhetoric used by the marketeers. It is an approach that changes the nature of programs and relationships with those we serve. We now have product and customers. This language, this new also paradigm sets the parameters of the debate and closes out many options, and it has direct effects on programs and services. The mentality leads to tracking and tiering of services that meet basic social needs.
- **Commodification of Archives**
Everything is a commodity, including heritage. An example is, the recent sale of Martin Luther King manuscripts by Sotheby's. When objects are raised about the public interest in the King archives, the retort: "Hey, this is private property [protected by Copyright]!" Everything has a price and the maniacal pursuit of it is exhibited en masse and watched on TV.
- **Mass Entertainment and Consumptive Experience**
Info-tainment an heritage as a tourist destination.
- **Privatization and the Liquidation of the Public Sector**
[Remove public agencies from scrutiny and accountability]

This issue is not just about use of contracted services. The BC Archives was a major user of contracted services and an innovator in partnering the private-sector to expand its program. But this is not privatization. Privatization is an act of disenfranchisement.

- Deregulation, Marketization, and Globalization

The door opens in all areas to a market under the control of the rich and powerful. More and more is removed from public scrutiny and democratic control. The public sector and the regulated economy have not perfect, that is for sure. There was inefficiency and lack of coordinated planning. Power was often hidden behind screens of illusion. But now the illusions have been reinforced. We are becoming a society based even more on predatory power and greed where social and economic control is hidden behind walled barriers of power. We are becoming a society that is less and less a community of common interests and increasingly a pit where the gap between rich and poor grows and special interests and corporate institutions exercise power beyond accountability or appeal.

Critics of this system and these developments are marginalized and isolated. The bombardments of consumerism and multi-media illusion paralyse the rest of us. The poor tumble down are excluded from participation. Social infrastructure, health, education, community services, and public assets are gutted, slashed, sold off, or turned over to profit-making organizations. Basic rights to health, security, and well-being are chipped away and thrown open to market forces.

An archives or a museum is a small cog in this giant wheel of change and neither can mitigate the effects of its roll very much, let alone stop it or change its direction. Likewise, the Crown Trust program and the BC Archives are not major parts of these forces nor are they necessarily conscious players in them. In the era of globalization, the demolition of the BC Archives is probably not a major event. But this event has taken place in the context of these forces and those responsible for it must to some extent be aware of them. We should be aware of them too.

Also, this is a major event to the citizens affected by it. It is a major event to the preservation of BC's documentary heritage. It is also major event for the users of archives and it is a hard hit, a very hard, against those small, misunderstood, oft-ignored, under-appreciated gems called archives.

Overheads follow

Demolition of the BC Archives

Loss of profile for archival programs. We have gone from a flagship archives to one that is part of a museum mandate.

Scrapping the Community Archives Assistance Program.

Discontinuing of transfer of records to local archives.

Disconnecting the Records Life Cycle: impeding the flow of government archives from Ministry records management programs to the BC Archives.

Loss of a critical mass of staff and resources that could be allocated or re-allocated for archives, not museum priorities.

Administrative efficiency and common services?

Emphasis on display and archival exhibits to the detriment of (1) the expansion of archival holdings (2) improvement in access to them.

Archives as Evidence or archives as programmed entertainment.

Recent Developments in Archives

Amalgamations and Take-overs

Closures and Reductions

**Freedom of Information or Formalization of
Access**

Privacy

Copyright

Special Categories of Users

Fees

Forces and Drivers

Commercialization

Commodification

Mass entertainment

Consumptive Experience

Privatization

[Remove public agencies from scrutiny and accountability]

Deregulation

Liquidation of the Public Sector

Globalization and Marketization

What Happened?

November 25, 2002

Royal BC Museum's
Core Review Update
Presentation to Cabinet

Crown Trust

Cultural Precinct

Amalgamation of
Part of BC Archives
Helmecken House
Carillon Tower

BC Archives split