Pulling Strings:
The Struggle to Document Canadian Society

Laura Millar

ABSTRACT

In this paper, based on her presentation to the Australian UNESCO Memory of the World Summit in Canberra, on 4 December 2018, Canadian archival consultant and independent scholar Laura Millar provides her perspective on Canada's archival system and discusses some of the challenges involved with the effort to centralise and control archival initiatives. She reviews the evolution of archival activity in Canada, discusses the 'crisis points' that have affected archival development in recent years, and outlines the current status of the Canadian archival system. She ends by challenging some assumptions about archival development and offers some suggestions for the Memory of the World delegates to consider as they develop strategies for documenting Australian society.

BIOGRAPHY

Laura Millar has been a records and archives consultant and independent scholar for over 30 years. She received her Master of Archival Studies degree from the University of British Columbia, Canada, in 1984 and her PhD in Archive Studies from University College London in 1996. She has taught for many years in the fields of information, records and archives management, as well as in the area of editing and publishing. She is the author of dozens of publications and presentations on topics related to records, archives, editing, publishing and education, including *The Story Behind the Book: Preserving Authors' and Publishers' Archives,* published by Simon Fraser University in Canada in 2009, and *Archives: Principles and Practices,* the second edition of which was published by Facet Publishing in 2017. Her latest book, *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age,* will be published by ALA/Neal Schuman and the Society of American Archivists in July 2019. Laura and her husband live in the community of Roberts Creek, on British Columbia's Sunshine Coast.

Responsibility's like a string we can only see the middle of.
Both ends are out of sight.

William McFee, *Casuals of the Sea*

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on my presentation to the Australian UNESCO Memory of the World Summit, delivered on December 4, 2018 in Canberra, Australia. In that presentation, and in this paper, I share my thoughts on some of the issues Canadian archivists experienced as we worked to develop our 'Canadian Archival System'. I am grateful to have been invited to the Canberra meetings, and I appreciate the support offered by the Australian Memory of the World Committee and the National Archives of Australia to facilitate my attendance at the summit.

As I noted at the beginning of my talk, I am not an official representative of the Canadian Council on Archives, which is a central organising agency for archival activities in Canada. Nor do I represent any of the federal, provincial, or territorial governments in Canada, nor am I a member of a Canadian university or research institute. I am an independent consultant and scholar who has studied Canadian archival development since the days of my master's degree in the 1980s. I have also, over more than 30 years, worked with agencies across Canada (and internationally) on the creation of sustainable archival programmes. My experience is extensive, but my remarks are my own. I am extremely grateful, however, to my colleagues and friends in Canada, including members of the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA), for offering their inputs and ideas during the research for this presentation.[1]

This paper is divided into four parts. In the first part, I review the evolution of archival activity in Canada, which is a story of personalities, politics, and persuasion. I end that section with a discussion of the different 'crisis points' that have influenced archival development in Canada in recent years, particularly the significant cuts to federal funding in 2012, which have affected the ability of archival institutions to sustain programmes they had been delivering for many decades. In the second part of the paper, I outline the current status of the 'Canadian archival system' and suggest that the direction Canada is following now is not the same as that advocated by the founders of that system. In the third part of the paper, I challenge some assumptions about archival development in Canada, including definitions of the concept of a 'system,' and I address what I believe is a central question: who is, ought to be, or can be responsible for archives in a digital age? I argue that the creation and protection of evidence and archives is a societal issue, not a professional issue. Perhaps the most important job of the archival community in a digital age is not to act alone but instead to help raise awareness of the value of archives across society, so that others can help drive the change we have been trying to achieve for so long. In the fourth and last part of the paper, I close with some thoughts for the Memory of the World delegates to take into account as they consider how to develop strategies for documenting Australian society.

Those who have heard me speak before may recognise words and ideas drawn from my various articles and speeches, including articles published in Canadian and Australian archival journals.[2]

I am happy to be allowed the opportunity to reflect again on what I believe is the most important issue facing records and archives professionals today, not just in Australia or Canada but around the world. How do we use our skills and knowledge as archival practitioners to help our societies protect their documentary evidence for accountability, identity, and memory, in an age when everyone is his or her own recordkeeper? The idea of 'documenting' society is noble, but the effort is not easy. In the digital age, preserving core evidence is not an endeavour that can or should be assigned only to a select group of professionals. Everyone in society needs to play an active part in preserving and making available the evidence of us. As I outline the story of Canada's pursuit of an 'archival system,' I hope to emphasise that, even though historical approaches made eminent sense in their day and time, the paradigm shift from the analogue to digital world requires that we – 'we' being recordkeeping professionals and 'we' being members of society – consider new strategies for documenting society.

CANADA'S ARCHIVAL ORIGIN STORY

So, to being at the beginning. As all archival studies students are taught on the first day of class, the essence of archival service is (or traditionally has been) to acquire, preserve and make available the documentary evidence of society's communications, actions and transactions. That documentary evidence was, for centuries, a tangible entity: physical items that had to be managed in particular geographic locations. The uniqueness of the items was intricately connected to their placement within an aggregation of materials. That aggregation – that collection of archival materials, that *fonds* as some will call it, were bound together by the integrity of their content, context, and structure. A king's proclamation made more sense when located within the archives generated by that king than found by itself, isolated from its historical and archival context. Archivists do not, by choice, collect single items; we acquire accumulations of materials, ideally through some formal process of physical transfer from creating agency to storage repository. Our work was, for centuries, bound by space and time: we had to wait for records to 'become' archives, to move from office to storage room, before we could intervene in their care. We participated only after the fact, as it were.

To provide this physical, time- and place-based service, archivists brought aggregations of archives – so often 'old' materials – into custody in a storage repository. Then we appraised, arranged and described the materials. We made sense of the aggregations and we identified items requiring more active treatment – special storage for a fragile map, custom-made containers for oversized bound books, and so on. Perhaps we copied some of the content to improve access or to protect fragile originals. Once we had worked our way through these materials in our custody, whether a handful of letters or miles of corporate records, we prepared our finding aids, placed the materials in safe storage, and invited researchers in to access the precious holdings.

This process was not just after-the-fact and custodial; it was also linear. Acquisition happened before preservation; appraisal before arrangement; arrangement before description; description before access. And in this custodial archival world, the holdings of an archival institution could only live in one place. Copies might be generated, but the originals were unique and irreplaceable.[3] Owning the archives, holding them, possessing them: this was the primary means of preservation.

This custodial model was common in archival institutions around the world, particularly in Western cultures. But the model became somewhat distorted in Canada. The country that became

Canada had been home to aboriginal people for millennia, but it did not become a distinct geopolitical entity, in a Western sense, until after the arrival first of fur traders and missionaries and then of settlers from France and refugees from the American revolution. Because Canada was a country with such a short documentary history compared with Europe, and because this evidence evolved out of a colonial culture, the bulk of archival sources – letters and diaries sent by settlers to their families in France or England; reports written by military officials or government representatives; financial statements sent by Hudson's Bay Company traders back to the head office in London – were held not in Canada but in offices in England and France. Many records relevant to Canada's development were not even created in Canada, or they were shipped back across the ocean as soon as they were no longer needed in the colonies. Only a small portion were kept in Canada, perhaps in the attic of a colonial government office or in the storage room at a military base.

As I outlined in in my PhD dissertation in 1996, Canadian archival institutions ended up taking a unique approach to the concept of archival management in large part because so little original documentary evidence existed in the country itself. European or English approaches, which involved transferring records from government offices to a nearby archival repository, did not apply in Canada. The first archivist, Douglas Brymner, who served from 1871 to 1901, was assigned the title of archivist, but he was not allowed access to Canadian government records. Indeed, he met strong and sustained resistance from government officials, who did not want to send their still very new official archives to him. In 1872, he proclaimed that, along with his job title, he was given 'three empty rooms' and vague instructions.[4]

To be fair, the volume of official government archives available for Brymner to acquire was negligible. The nation of Canada only came into existence with Confederation in 1867, a scant four years before Brymner's appointment. What would he collect from government departments that still wasn't needed by officials? Because his remit was vague and his access to official records limited, Brymner focused instead on collecting private archives: military papers, personal diaries, and copies (and copies and copies and copies) of colonial records and personal papers held in storage vaults in England and France.

Brymner's vision was to bring together in one physical place all historical material deemed worthy of preservation, regardless of source, medium, or origin. The origins of the archives – its provenance, original order or custodial history, all questions so important to archivists today – did not matter overmuch to Brymner. His goal was to gain custody of *something* documentary that helped to tell the story of Canadian history; less important was whether that *something* came from a government official, military general, or fur trader. This all-encompassing definition of archives was embraced by Brymner's successor, Arthur Doughty, who served as Dominion Archivist from 1904 to 1935. 'It is immaterial to the enquirer,' Doughty argued, 'whether a letter of a Governor has been found in a particular collection in Europe, or in Canada'.[5] As Doughty continued the broad approach to collecting begun by Brymner, the Canadian archival enterprise was soon defined by this vision of totality, and this blurring of lines between public and private. The origins of archives were of infinitely less importance than their value as sources of historical information.[6]
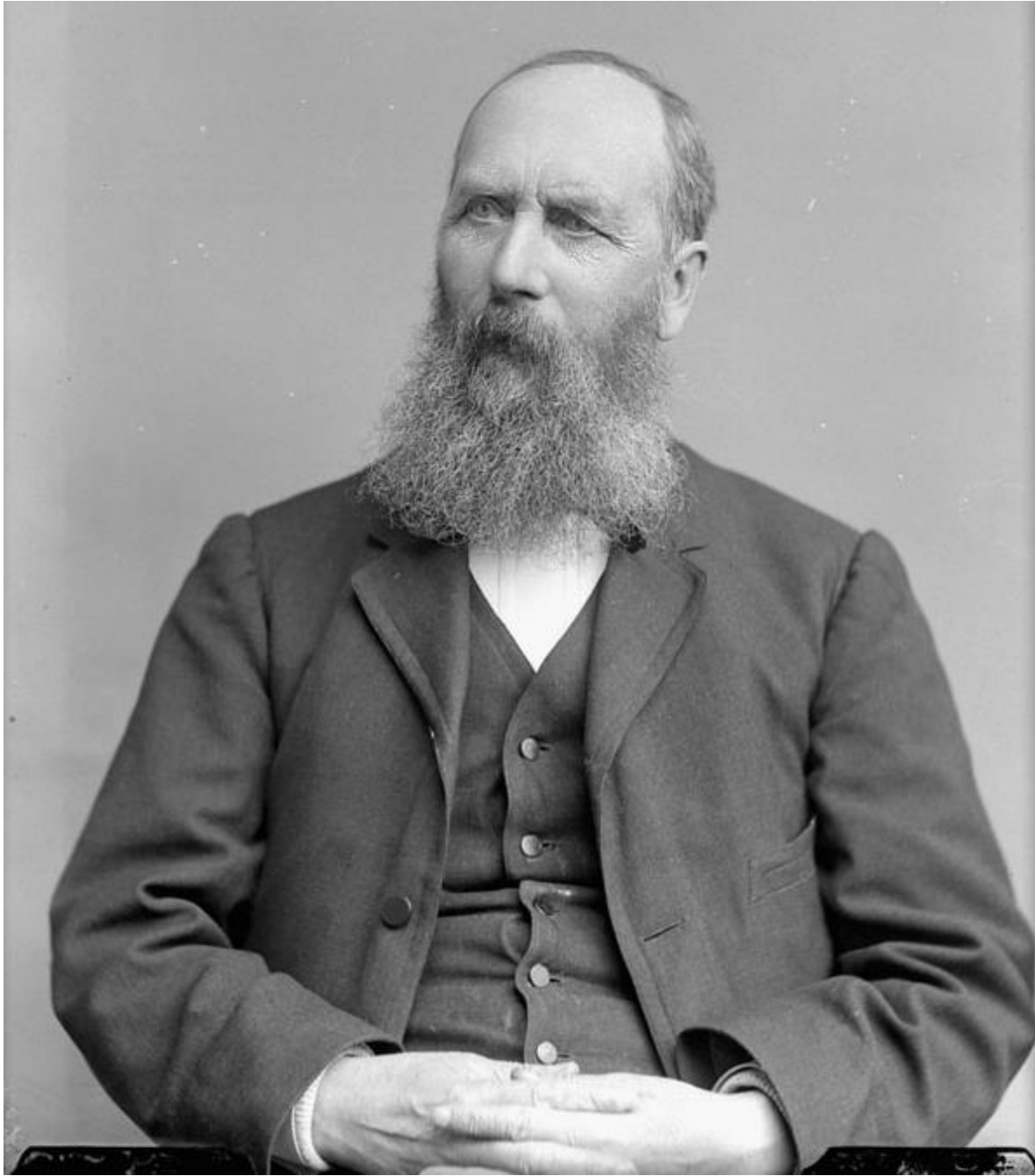
Figure 1: Douglas Brymner (n.d.)[7]

Figure 2: Arthur Doughty (n.d.)[8]

This inclusive approach was very different from the methods followed in Europe or England, where the distance from government office to archival repository was minimal, and where universities had collected private manuscripts for centuries. The Canadian approach was also different from the American strategy, which was built on a deep, engrained belief in the separation of the state and the general public. Americans did not want their government deeply involved in their private affairs, which encompassed the acquisition and preservation of archival sources. For Canada's southern neighbour, historical societies and museums were the right and proper place for non-government archives.

In fact, unlike many other countries, most notably the United States, Canadians quickly embraced their governments – federal, provincial, and municipal – as important actors in all aspects of society. Government, Canadians have long believed, should play a central role in fostering a national sense of culture and identity. It was, therefore, not just a benefit but a duty of government to collect and preserve archives from all sources, public and private, copies or originals, textual, visual, or aural. Any distinction based on origins, form, or purpose was subordinated to the central vision: if something historical were worth keeping, it would be kept.

For a century, Canadian archival development followed this model, as first the Dominion Archives of Canada in Ottawa, and then the various provincial archives that developed over the years, actively and deliberately collected both public and private archives. Over time, though, this total archives approach gradually became unsustainable. Federal and provincial governments found it difficult to maintain the financial and administrative effort required to sustain such comprehensive collections. Local populations began to resent the fact that 'their' archival riches were housed in repositories so far from their home. In a country the size of Canada, travelling to the central archives in Ottawa from, say, New Brunswick (1,000 kms to the east) or British Columbia (4,300 kms to the west) made research complicated and expensive. Why, many scholars asked, should 'our' records be housed so far away?

As well, there was a growing need in many governments (the primary custodial agencies in this all-inclusive archival model) to become much more involved with institutional records management. Archivists in these agencies were either forced to split their attention between the care of institutional archives and the management of collected archives, or they were cut out of the recordkeeping loop entirely, only gaining access to legacy archives long after the fact.

In its final report in 1951, The Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (popularly known as the Massey Commission) argued that local archives were essential to Canadian cultural development:

> The local archival collection, whether provincial, municipal or private, is an essential factor in the effectiveness of the national institution; first, because of the source of materials which it contains; second, because through its functions it serves as an agent in gathering and preserving, no matter where, materials that might otherwise be destroyed; and third, because its existence and its services encourage scholarly historical investigations which are one of the principal interests of the national institution.[9]

As provincial, territorial, university, and municipal archives began to emerge across Canada, the archival pie was divided. The Public Archives in Ottawa focused more on archives of national significance, and institutions in the regions took over the care of materials more relevant to their jurisdictions. But the overarching concept of 'total archives' was not abandoned: most Canadian

archival institutions – and bear in mind most of them were government-run or funded through the public purse – continued to collect both institutional and private archives.

The total archives vision was entrenched in 1972, when Dominion Archivist Wilfred Smith argued that public archival institutions should be responsible 'not only for the reception of government records which have historical value but also for the collection of historical material of all kinds and from any source which can help in a significant way to reveal the truth about every aspect of Canadian life'.[10]

But the model was increasingly unsustainable. How could publicly funded institutions care for both institutional and private archives in the face of shrinking budgets and given the burgeoning volumes of modern records? An attempt was made to change direction, when the Commission on Canadian Studies argued in 1972 that a new approach to archival preservation was needed. Hoping to support the growing interest in Canadian Studies as a topic of scholarly research, and to promote a 'made in Canada' solution, the author of the Commission's report, Tom Symons, recommended refocusing archival management away from government and strengthening the role of universities and research institutions.[11]

The ideas promoted by Symons were rejected by the nascent archival profession, represented by the brand-new Association of Canadian Archivists, which had been established in 1975. Members of the ACA argued that prioritising university programmes was not the answer. Instead, they argued, the government should support and promote a coordinated, publicly funded strategy for archival development: an 'archival system'. To help draw the lines of this new 'system,' the Canadian government funded the creation of a Consultative Group on Canadian Archives, to investigate the question further. The Consultative Group reported in 1980 that indeed the Canadian archival community should develop a 'comprehensive system of archives': a coordinated, controlled, and publicly supported network of archival institutions across Canada.[12]

This idea of a system was accepted by the federal government, which then provided public funds to create a Canadian Council of Archives (CCA), an umbrella organisation established in 1985 to allow the archival community to develop a cooperative, grassroots approach to archival service. Local governments, historical societies, museums, and other institutions were encouraged to develop archival collections that served their own community needs, and a federal grant programme was established, to be administered by the CCA, to support the establishment and growth of more and more local archival institutions. The government also provided funds to allow the CCA to provide the technological and administrative infrastructure needed to make good use of emerging digital technologies.[13]

The number of institutions operating within this 'archival system' grew dramatically. There were fewer than 200 formal archival institutions in the early 1980s but nearly 1,000 in the first decade of the 21st century. A large number of these institutions adhered to the total archives philosophy: they acquired and managed their institution's official records, they collected and preserved non-institutional documentary evidence, and they accepted materials in all media and all forms.[14]

What was the essence of this archival system? During what some might call the CCA's 'golden age,' the Canadian archival community based archival efforts on several assumptions about the nature, scope and purpose of this archival system. These assumptions included the following: that cooperation across institutions was natural and inevitable; that standardisation of description was essential and therefore must be implemented consistently across the country; that the 'ideal'

archives were *fonds* or whole collections of historical materials, not current records and not fragments of collections or single items; that a primary focus of archival service ought to be to support the scholarly researcher (in keeping with the goal of supporting Canadian studies); and that because archival institutions were different from museums, libraries, art galleries, or interpretive centres, archival work had to develop separately from the work undertaken by and for other agencies responsible for culture or information.

To support these assumptions, the CCA undertook a number of tasks in the three decades after its founding in 1985. For instance, to support acquisition planning, a committee was established in 1988 with the goal of developing a National Acquisition Strategy. The committee produced a report in 1994 outlining a vision: formal acquisition networks would be established and institutions would agree areas of acquisition. The report was not accepted by the CCA, however, and the committee was disbanded in 1995. As Richard Valpy discusses in his article outlining the history of acquisition planning in Canada, archivists alone cannot dictate how their governments will allocate resources, which he argues is one of the reasons a national acquisition strategy was not feasible.[15]

To support archival description, the CCA published the national standard *Rules for Archival Description* (*RAD*) in 1990.[16] The CCA then made it mandatory for archival institutions to use to use the standard for archival descriptive projects funded with federal 'backlog reduction' grant monies. One of the goals was to standardise descriptive practice, which had been highly idiosyncratic. Another goal was to facilitate the development of a national archival descriptive database or portal, providing digital access to archival descriptions from across the country. The portal, originally known as CAIN – the Canadian Archival Information Network – and later called ArchivesCanada, served not only as a descriptive portal but also as an online network for archival institutions.[17]

Because two key archival principles behind *RAD* were, first, that archivists should describe from the general to the specific and, second, that the central archival unit to be described first was the *fonds,* archivists began describing '*fonds*' even when, in fact, they only had in hand one or two discrete archival items. This approach, while respectful of a core archival theory in Canada, ended up filling online descriptive portals with multitudes of descriptions of one- or two-item 'fonds', which some would argue compromised the quality of the descriptive tools.[18]

Another challenge with this coordinated approach to online description was that, in addition to the central national database, many provinces and territories set up their own portals, as did universities and research centres. Over time, archival descriptions might appear in one, both, or many descriptive databases, and some archivists found it difficult to maintain descriptive content on more than one site. Concerns grew about consistency and completeness: it was ironic that in the quest to evolve from a centralised, 'total archives' approach to a decentralised 'archival system,' the very act of decentralisation complicated the effort at standardisation and inclusion.

The CCA also established an 'archives advisor' programme, using government grants to fund full- or part-time archival advisor positions across the country. The advisors provided education and training, conducted site visits and provided advice for archival institutions in the region in which they were based. One of the unintended consequences of the advisor programme was that in some cases, the advisors would actually do the work of arrangement and description, perhaps developing an intellectual arrangement and description and then leaving it to the local archivist to apply the principles to the actual paper records. Not every archivist was successful in this

effort, which meant that a logical and standards-based online description might not find its equal in the actual archives in storage.[19]

In 2004, the Canadian archival landscape changed, when the National Archives and National Library – which had begun life as Brymner's 'three empty rooms' some 130 years before – were merged into one agency, Library and Archives Canada. This blended national library and national archives became the home of agency archives, collected archives, the country's legal deposit collection of publications, along with a wide range of other resources, published and unpublished, public and private, from maps and plans to photographs and documentary art. As archival efforts were devolving to local levels across the country, the national institution was forging a few path – merging both library and archives services into a coordinated (if not completely unified) whole.

Throughout the evolution from total archives to archival system, Canada's vision of comprehensive, controlled, and encyclopedic archival management, through the creation of a coordinated nation-wide archival system, remained paramount. But just as this documentary nirvana seemed to be in sight, the CCA and the Canadian archival community faced a crisis. The federal funding programme in place since 1989 had provided CAD $1.5 million a year for archival activities across the country; the funds supported the management of the ArchivesCanada portal, the development and implementation of archival standards, the archival advisor services, and a range of arrangement and description projects across the country. But in 2012, the funding programme was cancelled, throwing archival initiatives into disarray. When the funding was eliminated, it was discovered that many institutions had in fact become heavily reliant on those grant funds. Some institutions used the grants to supplement core services, not just for special projects. Some ongoing staff positions had been funded in part by grant money, and unless the institutions could find other sources of income, they faced the sad reality of having to release 'project' staff who might have been working for the institution for decades.[20]

After a hiatus of a couple of years, the federal government replaced the original CCA funding programme with the Documentary Heritage Communities Programme (DHCP). This new funding programme offered the same general amount of money, CAD $1.5 million a year, but the process for obtaining grants was very different. Applications went directly to the federal government, through Library and Archives Canada, rather than through the CCA, and the benchmarks for success were quite different, focusing more on making available selective portions of archival holdings, for instance, and focusing less on reducing backlogs of archives that might have been in storage for years. The CCA's own level of funding was reduced significantly, which made it difficult, if not impossible, to maintain the advisory and network services that had become so engrained in Canadian archival practice. For close to 30 years, the CCA had been the 'only game in town' for the archival system, but without core funding it was not able to maintain the same level of support for the archival community.

CURRENT STATUS

Since 2012, the CCA can no longer offer the same services it had provided in past years. Its purpose and focus have changed, as have the assumptions underlying its work. For example, the CCA stepped away from the vision of developing a shared, formal, national acquisition strategy, instead issuing 'guiding principles' that encourage cooperation but do not designate specific collecting areas. The CCA has also supported the development of a draft standard for archival

accessioning. The administration of ArchivesCanada has been outsourced to a third-party provider (which charges for maintaining the site, albeit at a reduced rate compared with commercial services.)

Figure 3: ArchivesCanada Portal, 2018[21]

The CCA continues to administer grant funds for summer students and interns in archives and heritage positions, which is a different pot of money from the DHCP funding programme. The CCA relaunched the National Archival Appraisal Board or NAAB, which is the entity tasked with assigning monetary value to archival collections in Canada (primarily for tax purposes). The CCA has also been offering workshops and training sessions on topics such as monetary appraisal, copyright and digital preservation, and the Secretariat began contracting its own services to other organisations in order to top up its revenues.

At the same time, the other heritage and cultural agencies that might once have come together as part of a collective whole – museums, galleries, libraries and universities – have pursued completely different directions. The Virtual Museum of Canada portal collects cataloguing and descriptive information about artifacts in museums across the country. At Library and Archives Canada a new portal, called Voilà, provides descriptive information about books, publications, maps, music and more. The National Gallery of Canada has developed various databases to describe and provide digital images of the artworks in its collection. Local and provincial institutions – archival and otherwise – are also developing their own tools and resources, as are universities and research centres across the country.[22]

Canadians are rightly proud of the efforts undertaken over many decades to develop an 'archival system'. And the leaders in the CCA are to be commended for their tireless, heroic efforts to keep alive this archival aspect of Canadian collectivity. But there is little question that without core funding, the grassroots approach envisioned over three decades ago – an approach intended to be comprehensive, controlled and encyclopedic – is struggling to remain afloat, and is far from flourishing.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

Does the reduction in CCA services represent a decline in the archival system? Is it a consequence of changes in technology? Is it simply a victim of diminished funding: a decline that could be corrected with a fresh infusion of money? Or is the change in archival services a sign that Canada is, or ought to be, pursuing a different direction, one that is less centralised and more diffused? As I suggest here, I think that the change affords Canada an opportunity to shed some outdated assumptions about archival management, assumptions that have left traditional institutions dependent on public funding, and that have not encouraged broader public input into the archival endeavour. This inward-looking approach – this 'closed system,' as I argue below – is increasingly unsustainable in a digital age.

There is no question that computers have changed the game. As more and more organisations have adopted electronic technologies, and as individuals have become so closely attached to their smartphones and social media accounts, the nature of communications and information has changed completely. We all hear the stories of terabytes of data in cloud computing systems, of billions of text messages sent and received, and of the constant presence of smartphones in society. In 1948, the first stored-program computer, nicknamed Baby, was built in Manchester, England. Baby filled an entire laboratory. Today, many of us work in institutions that hold their entire office recordkeeping systems – their corporate archives – in cloud-based storage systems, and we go about our daily work by gaining access to critical sources of evidence through computers or cell phones – through pieces of technology smaller than a piece of bread.

Computers, the Internet, personal digital assistants, and social media networks are more than tools, and their impact is more than technological. They are, as the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan predicted a half century ago, drivers for social and organisational change. Digital technology has transformed how people conduct their business and personal lives, interact with each other, and document those interactions and communications. Today, virtually all of society's records start life in digital form, and these digital products – which archivists want to preserve in order to support accountability, identity and memory – are now directly in the hands of their creators. The custodial, mainstream recordkeeping institution can no longer wait for years after records are created to participate in their care. The records may not exist a year from now, or a month from now, never mind decades or centuries into the future.

When archivists come together to consider ways in which to coordinate archival activity, as Canadians did when conceiving of the archival system and as Australians are doing today with these important discussions about how to document Australian society, it is not enough to look to traditional archival activities for guidance. We have to shake some of our assumptions.

One assumption is that it is possible to sustain a traditional, custodial, linear archival process in a digital environment. If archival collections depend on the acquisition and preservation of

authentic and reliable evidence, archivists cannot wait for digital records to be created, then used, then stored, then appraised, and then preserved in order to capture core evidence for posterity. Valuable records may well end up in custodial care, but they will only arrive in such environments if they are identified as valuable from the moment of creation, and then if they are protected, so that their value remains intact, throughout their life.

Another assumption is that archival standardisation is and always will be a good and necessary action. In Canada, standardisation has focused primarily on archives in custody: the 'whole' body of records, the *fonds.* As I have suggested, there has also been a significant gap between the theory and the practice – what is a fonds if all that is left is a single item? In a digital age, we start with items – with bits and bytes, with individual digital objects, which might relate to one fonds as equally as they might relate to another. Hierarchical approaches to arrangement and description will and must give way to more fluid linkages – webs of evidence that relate to different creating agencies, different functions, different times, and different places. The Australians have led the way with concepts of the records series and continuum, and Australians can build on these successes by emphasising the importance of preserving valuable evidence from the moment of creation, in order to secure the small portion worth keeping permanently, rather than adhering to the traditional, and increasingly outdated, model of waiting for a future 'whole' to exist before taking action.

A related assumption, popular in Canada for decades, has been that centralisation and control are good things. The goal of creating one physical repository for the whole of Canada (first as the Dominion Archives of Canada, then the Public Archives, the National Archives, and now Library and Archives Canada) was in the 19th and early 20th centuries. But as regional and local identity strengthened, so did resistance to centralisation. But when archivists conceived of the idea of a central, national digital repository – along with standardised descriptive tools and cohesive acquisition strategies – were they not falling into the same trap. Comprehensive, controlled, encyclopedic archival systems are a wonderful dream, but they are a dream. We must leave room for local interests, for different models of archival practice, for variations and deviations. Evidence does not conform to standards; it is created by different communities in the manner and form suitable to those communities. Trying to control the archival process is like trying to control memory making, and just as open to failure.

Another assumption is that the archival enterprise is entirely different from that of museums, libraries, galleries, and other agencies. Even though the Canadian approach to archives was 'total,' it was total *archives,* not total *memory* or total *heritage* or total *identity* or total *accountability.* This archives-oriented approach made sense in a linear, custodial, physical world – where people would have to come into an archival repository in order to see a body of records – but it makes less sense in a virtual world. Wouldn't it be more inclusive, when people are searching for information about, say, a political movement, to provide them with integrated access not only to archives but also to publications, artifacts, oral histories, works of art, and anything else that tells the story of that movement?

In a digital age, it is much easier to coordinate and share information across disciplinary boundaries. Certainly, some differences will always exist – archivists tend to focus on contextualisation, though that is not our only remit, while museum curators might emphasise interpretation and librarians might concentrate on access. But finding common ground is not as difficult as some believe. Assuming we cannot build bridges across disciplines doesn't help our

professions or our public; sticking to traditional, linear approaches does not help us in our quest to open the tent.

Another assumption that has weakened the sustainability of the Canadian archival system – perhaps the most frustrating assumption – has been the belief (or the reality) that we could build a sustainable national archival programme on the back of project-oriented, grant-based funding. Core funding is crucial to success. Agencies such as archives, libraries, or museums, which are often so deeply dependent on the public purse, cannot survive on precarious sources of funding. Archivists know that, and we don't like it; I think it is time we pushed back. The easy availability of a grant today can do more harm than good, if the project funded with that money does not result in concrete actions for the long-term survival of the institution and its collections. Perhaps the most important action archivists need to take today, in order to support the preservation of documentary evidence in a digital age, is not to lobby for more money from our governments but instead to raise public awareness of the need for ongoing, sustained support for the archival endeavour. The public needs to understand that archives matter. The public are not indifferent. It's just that they *don't know*. And we have not told them. Not adequately.

A final assumption – which I believe has had a significant negative influence on Canadian efforts – is the belief that responsibility for success with the development of an archival system rests with, and only with, archivists. The Canadian archival system, as defined today, is what engineers would refer to as a 'closed system'. As seen in the CCA's diagram, the public plays a marginal role at best in the development and maintenance of archival services and programmes.
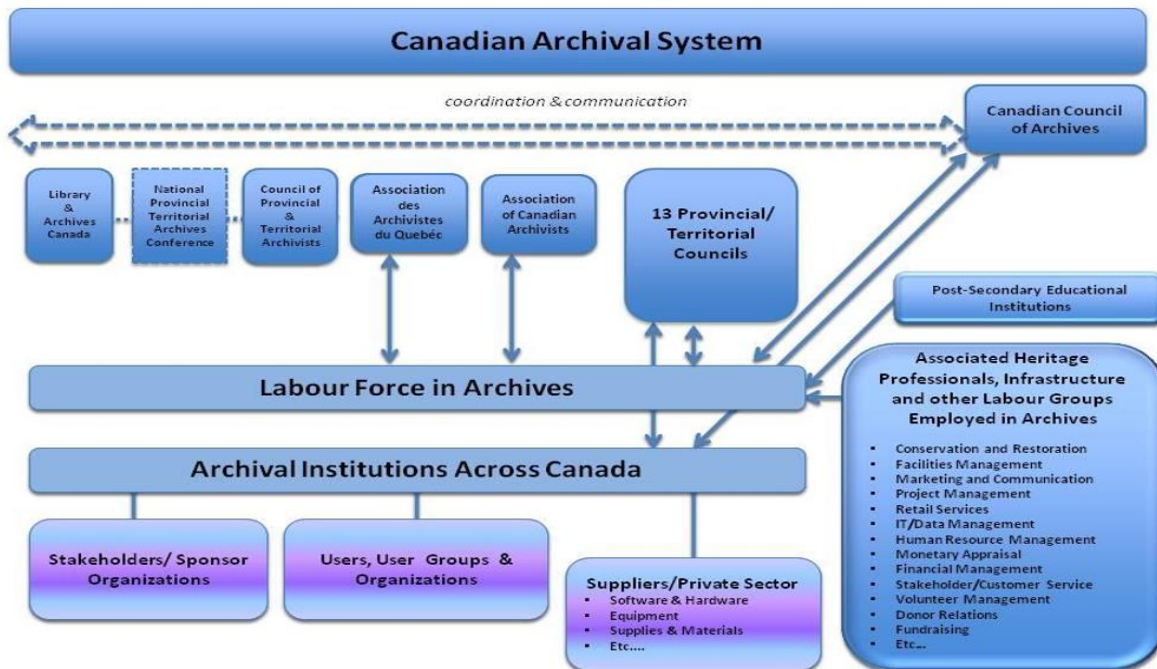

Figure 4: The Canadian Archival System[23]

Rather than place the responsibility for archival success on the shoulders of a handful of under-resourced and over-worked archivists, wouldn't it be more effective to engage with the public directly, to persuade them to speak out on behalf of the value of archives, records, and evidence? As Canadian archivist Richard Valpy has argued, there is an important role for public-facing, stakeholder-driven organisations, which can bring a louder voice to the call for the preservation of archives and records than records professionals can by ourselves.[24] If archives cannot be protected unless we take action at the point of creation, and if that action requires that the public understand that archives matter, then talking with the public is going to be one of the most important actions archivists can take to support archival development in the 21st century.

MUSINGS FOR THE MEMORY OF THE WORLD

So, what ideas can Australian archivists take away from my remarks on the Canadian archival system? I offer the following few points, which I hope will serve as a basis for fruitful and lively discussion as the Australian Memory of the World Committee considers next steps.

First, it is important to wrestle with language. What is 'documentary heritage' in a digital age? What are archives? What are records? What should be preserved, by whom, and why? I would like to suggest that we start by considering which words are most meaningful in a digital age: records, archives, evidence? I happen to favour the term 'recorded evidence,' which I define as 'any source of information that has been fixed in space and time, and can be verified as authentic, so that it serves as demonstrable proof of a fact, opinion, action, or idea'. believe we should consider broad and culturally relevant definitions of evidence, however, not narrow legal or administrative interpretations.[25]

Evidence is a social construct, just like financial currencies or geopolitical boundaries. The Australian dollar and Canadian dollar are 'dollars' because everyone agrees that they are; otherwise, they are just pieces of paper with ink on them. Similarly, the border between Canada and the United States exists not as a physical line on the ground but as a series of treaties and legal agreements. As soon as one or the other party to those agreements decides that the border does not exist, then Canadians and Americans will face a legal conflict, at best, but at worst, a land war.

Like currencies or borders, evidence exists because people decide that they wanted some form of proof, just as they decide they want some way to facilitate trade or some way to define what is their property versus what is someone else's. People want to document something, and they want that documentary product to stand for some form of proof. There is no 'right' way to create a record. People decide what they will document, how and why according to their own needs, technologies, politics, and customs. The challenge for archivists is not to preserve only the sources that *we* define as evidence but to work with our constituent groups to help preserve the sources that *they* define as evidence.[26]

As Australians work together to imagine a way to document Australian society, I would encourage frank and full discussions about what different communities in Australia define as evidence. Only by opening up definitions to cultural differences can we come together to decide what types of evidence might or might not be included in the particular scope of Australia's Memory of the World activities.

Another assumption that must be challenged is that public funding – especially sustained public funding – will be available, inevitably and consistently. The reality Canadians faced, when federal funds were eliminated, was that grant funding had not, in fact, helped us to build a sustainable foundation for archival development. Institutions could not turn to core funding because they had come to rely for so long on intermittent grant monies; they had not been able to build a stronger institutional underpinning for their work. The people decide whether or not to fund archival services were not, in too many instances, convinced of the value of such services. Archival efforts may have been seen as noble and valuable, but they were also seen as 'cultural' frills – in the realm of the optional, not the essential. But evidence *is* essential: to society, to accountability, to identity and to memory. If the protection of evidence is going to become a core part of daily life and work, then the public's perception of archives as 'old,' 'cultural' and 'historical' need to change. Only when those perceptions change will opportunities for sustained funding improve.

This change in perception requires that we tackle another assumption: that 'archives' are somehow different from 'records' or 'evidence' and, because they are different, they must be managed differently: at other times, in other places. Archives are often defined as that subset of documentary evidence worth keeping in perpetuity, because they have value as proof beyond the current moment. But if we wait to capture 'archives' only when they have ceased to have immediate usefulness, we risk not having anything left to capture five or ten years from now. Digital technologies will not wait for archives to age, like fine wine. We have to act now, at the point of creation, so that we have something left to preserve.

Efforts to preserve Australian documentary evidence in a digital age will depend not just on identifying what is 'left behind' today but what might be created tomorrow, and then working with records creators to promote public awareness of the value of that evidence, so that it will survive long enough to become part of Australia's collective memory.

In order to be there at the beginning, archivists either need to insert ourselves in every documentary transaction the moment it happens – which is an impossible task – or we need to encourage the creators of evidence to manage those sources effectively – which is a more achievable goal. If records creators know enough to protect evidence from the start, or at least to ask for help when they need it, then perhaps the proof we want for today and for the future will survive long enough for someone, such as an archivist, to impose a measure of control over their care.

This is why public awareness is so terribly important. We must engage with and educate the public, from executives in board rooms to children in kindergarten classes, about the value of evidence. Supporting public awareness of and participation in archival care will only enhance our success. Records and archives professionals bring enormous experience, talent, and knowledge to the table. We know how to use the tools we have developed to help capture and preserve evidence. We need to share our knowledge, and our tools, with the public. We need to relinquish some of our control and become facilitators more than custodians. Instead of trying to do the job for the public, which traditionally meant waiting and hoping that 'new stuff' survives to become 'old stuff', we can make it easier for the public to do the job themselves now, not later, when there is no 'old stuff' left.

CONCLUSION

I believe in the value of records and archives as tools to support democracy, transparency, and accountability, as sources of personal and collective identity, and as drivers for the creation and preservation of individual and collective memory. I believe that records and archives help create enlightened, civilised societies, societies that are democratic, respectful, and self-aware. And I believe in the mission of records professionals – records managers and archivists – to protect records to support accountability, identity, and memory. But we cannot achieve this mission alone. To reflect on the words of the author William McFee, from a century ago, the archivist's responsibility to society is like a piece of string. We cannot see the end. And if we pull too hard, the string will break. We need to achieve that fine balance between exercising our own skills and capacities and encouraging members of society to document themselves, for themselves. It is not a binary either/or choice; it is a long and winding course. Like a piece of string.

The digital age is forcing us to engage with sources of evidence much sooner than ever before. As a result, it is quite possible that Memory of the World initiatives, not just in Australia or Canada but around the world, will need to be reimagined. Perhaps we need to place more emphasis on collective strategies and awareness raising, and less on custodial approaches. The question for archivists is not whether we will rise to that challenge – we must. The question is how to achieve success: how to ensure that our societies have the documentary evidence they need to know themselves, to reflect on their past – whether that past is a century ago or yesterday – with honesty, integrity, and honour. I hope my thoughts in this paper offer some food for thought as Australians consider how to achieve these important goals.

¹ I particularly appreciate the time taken by members of the Canadian Council of Archives to discuss the status of activities and the impact of funding changes on Canadian archival development. Joanna Aiton Kerr, Christina Nichols, and Lara Wilson, all representatives of the CCA, joined me for a conference call on November 20, 2018, in anticipation of my presentation at the Canberra summit. Their ideas and suggestions were extremely helpful. I would also like to thank Cathie Oats, of the National Library of Australia (NLA), for talking with me on November 7, 2018; she offered tremendously helpful background about Trove, the digital heritage platform administered by the NLA. While the input provided during these conversations was invaluable to my research, my colleagues are not responsible for my analysis; any errors of interpretation are entirely my own.

² I have written extensively about the concept of total archives in Canada, as well as about related issues, such as the challenges of adopting the concept of the *fonds* and the strengths and weaknesses of the Australian series system. The following publications are most relevant to the topics I address here: 'Discharging Our Debt: The Evolution of the Total Archives Concept in English Canada', *Archivaria*, vol. 46, Fall 1998, pp. 103–46; 'The Spirit of Total Archives: Seeking a Sustainable Archival System', *Archivaria*, vol. 47, Spring 1999, pp. 46–65; 'The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time', *Archivaria*, vol. 53, Spring 2002, pp. 1–15; 'The Legacy of Peter Scott from an International Perspective', in Adrian Cunningham (ed.), *Arrangement and Description of Archives amid Administrative and Technological Change: Essays and Reflections by and about Peter J Scott*, Australian Society of Archivists, Brisbane, 2010; and 'On the Crest of a Wave: Transforming the Archival Future', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 59-76.

³ I discussed the concept of copying and publishing documentary sources as a tool for preservation and dissemination in my 1984 Master of Archival Studies thesis and in a subsequent article. See Laura Millar Coles, ' The Decline of Documentary Publishing in Canadian Archives, 1865-1984,' University of British Columbia, 1984, and 'The Decline of Documentary Publishing: The Role of English Canadian Archives and Historical Societies in Documentary Publishing,' *Archivaria* 23 (Winter 1986-87), pp. 69-85.

⁴ Brymner is quoted in 'Secretary's Report of the Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., December 26-28, 1888', in *Papers of the American Historical Association,* Vol. III (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1889), p. 254. For more information on Brymner's life and work, see Glenn Wright, 'BRYMNER, DOUGLAS', in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 13, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, available at http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/brymner_douglas_13E.html.

⁵ Canada, Archives, *Report on Canadian Archives* (1905), p. ix, quoted in Millar, 'Discharging our Debt,' p. 110.

⁶ For more on the evolution of this total archives concept, see Millar, 'Discharging Our Debt'.

⁷ Photograph by William James Topley. Library and Archives Canada reference no. PA-168283, MIKAN ID 3229856.

⁸ Photographer unknown. Library and Archives Canada reference no. C-051651, MIKAN ID no 3215013.

⁹ Canada, Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, *Report,* pp. 118–22, quoted in Millar, 'Discharging our Debt', p. 115.

¹⁰ W.I. Smith, 'Introduction,' *Archives: Mirror of Canada Past* (Toronto, 1972), pp. 9–10, quoted in Millar, 'Discharging our Debt', p. 117.

¹¹ See T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies,* vol. 1 (Ottawa, 1975), pp. 69-74.

¹² See Millar, Discharging our Debt, pp. 118-23. See also the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Consultative Group on Canadian Archives, *Canadian Archives: Report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada by the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives* (Ottawa, 1980), esp. pp. 8–9.

¹³ See Millar, 'Discharging our Debt,' pp. 123-25.

¹⁴ For a discussion of this growth in archival institutions, see Millar, 'Coming Up with Plan B,' esp. p. 112.

[15] See Richard Valpy, 'From Missionaries to Managers: Making the Case for a Canadian Documentary Heritage Commission,' *Archivaria* 82 (Fall 2016), pp. 137-63.

[16] The CCA's *Rules for Archival Description* is available online at http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/archdesrules.html.

[17] I discussed the evolution of, and strengths and weaknesses of, the CAIN initiative in 2003, in a web publication for the Association of Canadian Archivists called 'Seeking our Critical Vision: Speculations on the Past, Present, and Future of CAIN,' Association of Canadian Archivists Web Publication no. 3, May 2004; available at https://archivists.ca/ACA-Books-Guides.

[18] I discuss the application of the *fonds* concept in Canadian archives in detail in 'The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time', *Archivaria*, vol. 53, Spring 2002.

[19] See the discussion in 'Seeking our Critical Vision'.

[20] I discuss the funding crisis in detail in 'Coming up with Plan B'.

[21] See http://www.archivescanada.ca/.

[22] To see the Virtual Museum of Canada, go to http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/home/. To see Voila, go to https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/services/national-union-catalogue/Pages/national-union-catalogue.aspx. To see the National Gallery's digital collection, go to https://www.gallery.ca/collection/search-the-collection.

[23] The diagram and associated discussion about the system can be found on the CCA website at http://archivescanada.ca/ArchivalSystem.

[24] See Valpy, 'From Missionaries to Managers'.

[25] I consider the concept of evidence, especially as a social construct, in my forthcoming book *A Matter of Facts: The Value of Evidence in an Information Age* (Chicago, IL: ALA Neal Schuman, 2019).

[26] See my discussion about these concepts in Chapter 4 of *A Matter of Facts*.