Approaching the Millennium: Challenges and Prospects for British Columbia Archives

Christopher Hives
University of British Columbia

Keynote Address
Association of British Columbia Archivists (May 1998)

I am very pleased to have been asked to deliver this year's keynote address. Program chair Kelly Stewart indicated that the committee had in mind a keynote that would build upon some of the discussions in recent issues of the AABC *Newsletter* relating to the future direction of development of archives in British Columbia. Although, in general the talk would focus on the provincial archival system, the parameters of the keynote would be left to me.

There are a number of people who would have been able to do justice to this topic and provide some very useful insights into the recent evolution of the provincial archival community. If I do have an advantage and perhaps bring a unique perspective to this discussion, it is because I had the privilege of serving on the AABC executive and also as a long-time board member and chair of the Canadian Council of Archives. Following the amalgamation of the Association of British Columbia Archivists and the British Columbia Archives Council in 1990, the first AABC executive developed a number of important initiatives, some of which have a bearing on today's discussion. My eight years of service on the CCA board have provided me with a comprehensive overview of archival development in the rest of the country and provides a useful context within which to better understand and measure the accomplishments of the archival community in British Columbia.

In thinking about this paper, I needed some sort of framework to give structure to the discussion that follows. As so many others have done lately, I have unabashedly used the occasion of the approaching millennium to reflect on where we are as an archival community and speak in broad terms about the challenges confronting, and prospects for, archives in British Columbia. Taking time for this sort of reflection is important and very cathartic. Unfortunately, archivists often find themselves too oppressed by daily responsibilities to spend precious time thinking about the "big picture". For the rest of this session and that which follow we are going to have an opportunity to exchange ideas about the recent and potential future directions for the development of the provincial archival community. In particular, my remarks will focus both on efforts to build an inclusive provincial archival network and also some of the implications for participating repositories.

To suggest that archivists today face myriad challenges would be an obvious understatement. The current economic climate in which all levels of government are forced to choose amongst education, health and social welfare for the allocation of increasingly scarce resources generally leaves archives as relatively low priorities. As a consequence, it is unlikely in the short-term that archives will receive significant new funding to support their activities. At the

most basic level funding cuts result in reduced service and staffing levels as positions disappear or vacancies are left unfilled. Given the labour intensive nature of archives, staff cuts mean that patrons can no longer expect the same level of service than has been the case in the past.

Decreasing resources are also forcing institutions to reconsider the scope of material that they will acquire. Some archival repositories have narrowed their acquisition mandates and collect almost exclusively the records of their sponsoring agency. The selective retreat from the acquisition of private papers represents a movement away from the strict sense of 'total archives' which has characterized the development of many of Canada's public repositories.

Working within an increasingly complex record keeping milieu -- one characterized by an incredible proliferation of recorded information -- archivists face the additional pressures of coping with the mounting costs associated with the acquisition and preservation of archival records and the increasing expectations of users who demand more comprehensive access to archival materials. It is clear that budget reductions will have long-term consequences for the acquisition and preservation of, and access to, society's documentary memory.

Changing technology represents a major concern for archivists from several perspectives. First, archivists must spend considerable time learning and understanding increasingly complex record-keeping environments particularly given the vast array of records now generated electronically or on other new media. We also must face up to a number of purely practical considerations. One such concern is media obsolescence: at this point in time, archivists still do not have a clear idea about the life expectancies of floppy disks, computer tapes and optical disks. Even if the problem of media obsolescence is overcome, we still face the problem of hardware and software obsolescence, which means that, even if the tapes and disks survive, we may not be able to read them, so for all intents and purposes they may be inaccessible and unusable. It is ironic that while we live during a period of unparalleled record generation, information has never been so vulnerable. In fact, it might be argued that the more modern the information recording medium, the more fragile it seems to be.

If rapid changes in technology present archivists with problems it also provides a whole new set of opportunities. Take for example the development of the internet. Never before have archivists had available to them a tool with such power to disseminate information about archival materials to a potentially huge audience. However, this too has its downside as taking advantage of these tremendous opportunities requires that archivists seek out the necessary training and that archival institutions develop their own strategies for the internet. The Web presence of archives in Canada varies from the provision of basic administrative information to complete finding aids and, occasionally, even copies of digitized archival materials. The level of participation of repositories is generally determined by the level of in-house expertise.

As a result of information technology developments in general, archivists are beginning to experience increasing user expectations. Sophisticated researchers familiar with the capacity for automated, inter-institutional access to bibliographic information particularly in the library world, come to archives with similar expectations. Unfortunately, the archival community as a whole lags

significantly behind the library world in the adoption of standards for automation and description. This generally mitigates against the development of an inter-institutional approach to developing information systems and, as previously indicated, repositories are left to their own devices to provide users with holdings information.

Although computers have been used in numerous archival settings, automation projects have been carried out by individual repositories with little or no development in the area of inter-institutional access to holdings. The problem to date has been the absence of commonly accepted descriptive standards for archival material.

For more than a decade now the Canadian archival community has invested significant financial and human capital in the development of descriptive standards. The first complete edition of the *Rules for Archival Description* (RAD) appeared a couple of years ago. The speed with which *RAD* was developed is testament to the dedication of the individuals involved in its preparation and the degree of significance attached to the initiative by the archival community. Having completed the preliminary developmental phase it is now necessary to find ways to fast track its implementation.

Movement toward standardized descriptive practices is essential for providing users with effective and equitable access to holdings across a number of different repositories. What, for instance, would happen in the library world if there were no standards and patrons were expected to learn idiosyncratic systems at each library. Moreover, to what extent would it be possible for libraries to co-operate? Most of us understand the importance of standards in the library world that allow patrons to go into many different libraries with the expectation of finding a certain level of commonality. Standardization and harmonization of practice provides a foundation for joint activities that would not otherwise be possible.

The obvious importance of *RAD* notwithstanding, each archival institution must allot time to allow staff to study the Rules and develop plans for implementation. While the CCA has encouraged the implementation of descriptive standards by making the use of RAD mandatory for all descriptive projects it funds, there has been very little done in a systematic manner to help institutions master and implement descriptive standards. Most institutions in Canada have been left to grapple with the problem of implementing RAD on their own.

So far I have touched only briefly on a few of the myriad problems confronting archives with which we are all but too familiar. It might be suggested, however, that at least some of these problems are of less concern in British Columbia because some time ago, we developed a more systematic, inter-institutional approach and, in so doing, laid the foundation for a provincial archival network.

One of the most important factors in the development of such a network is the British Columbia Archival Union List (BCAUL). Initiated by the AABC in 1991 with financial support from the provincial and federal governments, this project is, perhaps, one of the most significant archival projects undertaken in Canada to date. From the outset, BCAUL was envisaged as a means

of developing an inclusive network of repositories in British Columbia, as a vehicle for the effective dissemination of information about standards for archival description and, finally, as a tool to provide for the efficient exploitation of archival resources maintained in archives throughout the province.

The original idea for BCAUL grew out of a project to develop an on-line database of archival description at the University of British Columbia Library between 1985 and 1988. The project produced one of the first fonds-level listings of archival holdings accessible through an on-line library catalogue. Having served as project archivist, I began to think about the value of expanding this project to include the holdings of repositories throughout British Columbia. I had the doubly good fortune in 1991 of being president of the newly-formed AABC and also having open-minded colleagues on the executive who, if not entirely convinced of the importance of the project, were certainly prepared to have the Association undertake a feasibility study. It is interesting to note that there was no great ground swell in the province for the development of a union list - it was basically an executive-driven initiative that, following the completion of the feasibility study, received the endorsement of the Association.

From the outset BCAUL was intended to be much more than a traditional archival union list such as the *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories*. The difference went beyond the fact that the BCAUL was in an electronic format. It was always envisaged as something more than a simple listing of the most important records from the most important repositories - a characteristic of earlier union lists. In many ways BCAUL traces its lineage perhaps more directly to the Symons and Wilson reports which were published in the late 1970s and the early 1980s respectively than to other union list projects. Both reports stressed the need to develop archival networks and the Wilson Report was an important element in the establishment of the Canadian Council of Archives. BCAUL's goals from the outset were focussed more on network building than on simply providing a list of holdings.

To realize its goal of network development BCAUL, from the outset, has been designed to include archives of all sizes throughout British Columbia. Because traditional union lists were primarily intended to provide information about archival holdings, they tended to be biased toward the most significant holdings from the more important repositories. Smaller repositories often lacked the resources and expertise to compile the information in the required formats in order to submit information to the national union lists. Moreover, in the absence of direct encouragement and support many smaller repositories felt their holdings to be of too little importance for inclusion in a national archival union list. To fully appreciate the significance of the inclusive aspect of the BCAUL project one need only read some of the many articles which have appeared in various local newspapers expressing some surprise but more often great pride in the fact that the holdings of their local archives were deemed worthy of inclusion in the new province-wide database of archival holdings. As the project proceeded repositories of all sizes have increasingly come to view themselves as integral components of a larger provincial archival infrastructure.

BCAUL had as its other primary object expediting the dissemination and implementation of the Canadian *Rules for Archival Description*. The need to talk the same language within the

archival community and to enjoy a certain level of commonality and standards were necessary both for the development of an archival network and for individual repositories interested in participating in it. In this sense the development of RAD made possible the development of BCAUL while the project, in turn, provided an effective vehicle by which information about descriptive standards has been communicated to archivists working in various archival settings throughout the province. Unlike other union list initiatives, BCAUL personnel actually visited each institution to explain the goals of the project, provide information about descriptive standards and compile the required documentation in consultation with the local archivist. These on-site visits from the project archivists were deemed essential in recognition of the already heavy workload of the local archivists and their inexperience with descriptive standards. Once project personnel have explained the basics of RAD and demystified it, local archivists feel more comfortable and confident in implementing it within their institutions.

In addition to its obvious advantages for expediting research by providing detailed information about archival material held in repositories throughout the province, BCAUL has also served as an effective management tool. With existing holdings, the information provided by the union list can help rationalize holdings. Materials can be identified for potential transfer to more appropriate repositories. Records may have been inadvertently alienated from the agency to which they rightfully belong or perhaps there is now a more appropriate repository that had not existed when the material was originally acquired. Finally, fonds split among a number of repositories can be easily identified and possibly reunited in one institution. BCAUL will also be very useful for inter-institutional planning activities as repositories will be able to re-evaluate their collecting practices and also more accurately identify material that might be falling through the cracks.

While it forms the cornerstone of the evolving network in British Columbia, BCAUL is not the only initiative contributing to this development. The goals of network building inherent in the BCAUL project have been further reinforced by other important initiatives such as the archives and conservation advisory services, the *Manual for Small Archives* (which is currently headed for its zillionth printing), and the provincial archives education program which has operated now for several years. As with the BCAUL, these have generally been funded and otherwise supported by a partnership that includes the AABC, the federal government through the CCA and the provincial government. The CAAP program operated by the provincial government has also provided grants to archives throughout British Columbia.

The success of BCAUL and other provincial initiatives in developing an archival network in British Columbia can be measured in a number of ways. Statistics indicate that there are now in excess of 8,000 fond level entries in BCAUL representing listings from 160 of the province's approximately 185 institutions.

The success of network development may also be gleaned from the attitudes and ideas expressed by archivists at some of the smaller archives. For instance, a few months ago Bob McDonald and Jane Turner, in a letter to the editor of the AABC *Newsletter*, seemed to question the wisdom of allocating CAAP funding to local archives. They stated:

...one has to wonder if the distribution of funds to many small archives that have sub-standard facilities is the most useful way to employ limited resources. Perhaps we should begin to consider the idea of a provincial archival network consisting of archives at colleges, larger museums, or municipal centres that could be given resources to become regional archives...

The response from archivists working in smaller archives in the province, which appeared in the last issue of the *Newsletter*, was loud and clear. Letter after letter expressed a firm conviction that small archives serve an important role in the provincial archival network and articulated a strong sense of commitment and belonging to that network.

Finally, if imitation is the sincerest form of flattery then current efforts to develop union lists in several other provinces should further illustrate the success of BCAUL. In fact, this idea of provincial/territorial union list development forms the cornerstone of the CCA's Canadian Archival Information Network (CAIN) initiative.

I have suggested that BCAUL has provided the foundation for the development of an inclusive network of B.C. repositories. It has also played an important educational role in disseminating information about descriptive standards that has helped move the provincial archival community forward as a whole. This network development has, in turn, inculcated in repositories a sense of participating in a larger archival system. This network approach is absolutely critical because, in meeting the challenges of the future, we will have to rely on more holistic, inter-institutional approaches to preserve our documentary heritage. It is against this backdrop of archival network development that I would like to discuss the current state of affairs in British Columbia concerning the acquisition of private papers.

Having reflected briefly on the important role played by BCAUL in providing a foundation of a provincial archival system, I would now like to discuss the place of the provincial archives, as well as other large public repositories, in that evolving network and, in particular, the issue of the collection of private papers. In addition, the discussion will also touch upon ideas about the general development of the archival community.

I should state clearly at the outset that I do not presume to speak on behalf of the provincial archives. Nor do I pretend to have any particular detailed insights into the operation of that institution. The comments I offer below and those made in the past come from my own understanding of the evolving provincial archival system and my observations of circumstances elsewhere in the country.

To help provide a context for this discussion it is useful to reflect on an exchange of letters over the past couple of years which appeared in the pages of the AABC *Newsletter* and that have provided the basis for a very healthy discussion both within and beyond the province's archival community. Since 1994, there has been a very interesting exchange of ideas primarily featuring Bob McDonald, myself, Jane Turner and other members of the provincial archival community.

In the most recent exchange of letters to the editor, there were several items on which I agreed with Turner and McDonald. This included the necessity of retaining the word "archives" in the name of the organization responsible for preserving and providing access to the province's archival records, the importance of maintaining the position of Provincial Archivist and "that the individual occupying it serve as an effective champion for the preservation of both public and private records within the provincial government."

In McDonald's original article and his subsequent piece with Turner, he argued for the need for archival legislation which would "include the collection and management of private records. Legislation should articulate such a role for BCARS in clear, forceful and unequivocal language." I suggested that we have to be realistic in our expectations of what exactly archival legislation would accomplish. In many Canadian jurisdictions, provincial archives have been forced by changing circumstances to focus more on the care of public records and less on the acquisition of private materials. This has happened, despite the fact that their official acquisition mandate extends to a full range of both public and private materials. In the end, archival legislation simply prescribes the parameters within which the archives is entitled to collect material, it does not require that all this material be collected comprehensively all of the time." Having sounded this cautionary note, I would certainly agree that the development of such legislation is very important in British Columbia as it would assist in the development of the archival system by identifying non-governmental records that the provincial archives would normally acquire.

We also agree that in light of the tremendous need in the archival community that CAAP is probably under-funded and that there should be clearer criteria used to determine qualifications of institutions eligible for receiving that funding. While Turner and McDonald at least hinted that funding would be better spent on the development of a handful of regional archival facilities, I still believe that the idea of distributing funding to a wide range of individual repositories is appropriate. I suggested as a first level limiting eligibility to repositories that meet the AABC's definition of institutional member.

The point on which we really lack consensus is in our respective understanding and beliefs about both the role of the provincial archives in the acquisition of private records and the development of an archival network in the province.

In his original letter, McDonald identified what he characterized as a general "tide of diminishing commitment by British Columbia's publicly-funded institutions to collect private papers." In a subsequent article in *Archivaria* he elaborated on his concern about private records:

> "As an historian I see records in cultural terms, the heritage of what we thought and how we acted in the past. In short, I see archival records as a reflection of who we are as a people - our collective memory - and think it imperative that, if we are to understand our history, and hence ourselves, we find ways to preserve this patrimony."

A subsequent piece co-authored with Turner focused more particularly on the apparent decrease in

provincial archives' acquisition of private papers. They suggested that "the Provincial Archives does not have a real, active and funded policy for the collection of private records, and it displays little desire to create one." Although according to McDonald and Turner the Provincial Archives does continue to collect some non-government records its efforts are largely passive "rather than having an active policy for collecting certain kinds of records, which it vigorously pursues."(3-4) For Turner and McDonald the organizational changes over the past decade represent an erosion of "the traditional view that the Provincial Archives is a cultural institution where records that are both public and private in origin constitute our collective memory, and reflect who we are as a people. (3) They conclude by stating that "the broad cultural goals that once gave direction to the Provincial Archives have been replaced by ends that are more narrowly administrative. In our view, the erosion of the Archives' broad cultural mandate does constitute a "crisis" of provincial proportions." (4)

Political commentator David Mitchell expressed similar sentiments in a recent *Vancouver Sun* article.

> "The B.C. Archives and Records Service shifted its focus away from serving the public towards more of an in-house government service....There are some who believe that this is part of a wicked conspiracy to deny the public access to historical records. Its more likely that the archives has become a victim of ignorance and incompetence....In the dull, modern language of public administration, history simply doesn't fit; government doesn't know what to do with heritage. In the absence of a political champion, the function has shifted back and forth between ministers and ministries, and back and forth again....Its more than political instability. Its more than bad management. It's a woeful lack of understanding of the value of our past. And its a shameful disregard for the history and traditions of British Columbia." (March 9, 1998)

In response to these arguments, I would like to discuss the question of archives' broad cultural mandate -- which is, of course, to preserve societal memory -- and the role to be played by the provincial archives in fulfilling that mandate.

In the past, we entrusted large public institutions - primarily national and provincial archives with the preservation and protection of society's documentary memory; we gave them power over the definition and perpetuation of societal memory: both public and private. As a result, that memory was defined and shaped in accordance with the values and priorities of those centers of national and provincial power.

This state of affairs was viable so long as we continued to believe in the myth of commonly held values and shared a common perception of archives as cultural property.

Over the last quarter century, that consensus has eroded and today few of us believe that large government institutions can speak for everyone. In the political arena, we have witnessed at national and provincial levels, increasing decentralization and the devolution of authority and

autonomy to local levels. It is becoming increasingly apparent that our national identity is typified, ironically, by the diversity and multiplicity of the regional, ethnic, and social identities that shape it.

In a community defined by a diversity of perspectives and a multiplicity of voices, there is no longer any defensible privileged position from which to judge what will and will not be preserved. If archives are to play a meaningful role in the preservation of societal memory, we need to accept that memory can assume many forms and its preservation is the responsibility of every record creating body not just a few.

So what are the implications for the societal role of archivists at the end of the millennium? It means, for one thing, that we must stop perpetuating a false dichotomy between the administrative and cultural goals of archives and bemoaning the way in which so-called administrative imperatives have eroded equally important cultural imperatives.

The societal role of the archivist is to ensure the preservation of societal memory. That is a cultural purpose. The archivist who seeks to ensure the preservation of sponsorial records by scheduling them and providing sound records management advice to records creators is every bit as engaged in a cultural pursuit as is the archivist who acquires the papers of a young Canadian poet or the records of the Vancouver Choral Society. Scheduling and effective records management may be administrative tools but they are aimed toward the achievement of the same cultural end as the acquisition of private records, that end being the identification and preservation of societal memory.

The real question is, how do we exercise our societal role to preserve a meaningful documentary trace of late 20th century culture, a culture that is characterized by transience, de-centralization, and fragmentation. A preliminary answer is to accept these realities and determine how best to reflect them in our methodologies.

We have moved from a conception of culture as monolithic and abstract and shaped by centralist preoccupations to a conception of culture as variegated and concrete and determined by local preoccupations and priorities. No provincial or national archival institution is capable of defining or defending an acquisition policy that presumes to capture the diversity of "provincial" or "national" culture.

If there is to be any possibility of capturing that diversity, we need to attract the attention of a broad range of records creators and encourage the preservation of documentary memory at the local level. So not only is the movement toward devolution of the responsibility for the preservation of our documentary heritage acceptable it is also necessary.

It was in this context, in addition to several practical concerns including budgetary constraints and changing demands on public archives, the development of many new archives in the province and the adoption of a more systematic and network-based approach to archival development in the province, that I responded to McDonald's original letter. In that response I proposed a new paradigm for the collection and preservation of private papers, one in which we look beyond assigning responsibility to a single repository or a handful of repositories, opting

instead for a more collective vision. I suggested that we might appropriate the environmental slogan "think globally, act locally".

By this I meant simply that we take a more holistic or collective approach - that we see the preservation of private records as a responsibility to be shared by repositories throughout the provincial system and not the primary responsibility of two or three larger public repositories as was the case in the past. As for the second part of the slogan - "act locally" - this suggests the importance of both having materials remain in the geographic areas in which they were created rather than being collected by and transferred to a distant public repository. Given the inability of the archival system to deal with the current volumes of records being generated, "act locally" was also extended to the idea that, where ever possible, creators of records should be encouraged to maintain their own archives.

The Wilson Report commented on the importance of maintaining material in "the organizations and communities generating those records" and warned that "if the records are judged only by what is worthy of importance to the central archives, many secondary records, essential from a local perspective, are left to a very uncertain fate..."(65) The report also expressed concern about the negative impact removal of the material might have on the development of new archives:

> With the cream of local material skimmed off to the central archives, any movement
> to establish an institutional or local archives withers and dies. And other local
> letters, diaries and photographs potentially valuable to Canadian studies remain
> largely hidden in family hands. (65)

As long as we pursue a model that has as its goal the "collection" of important private papers by large, remote archives, there will never be any impetus for local repositories to develop into anything more than what they are today. This is the consequence of Bob's suggestion of funneling material to the provincial archives, and, albeit to a lesser extent, the impact of establishing regional centres responsible for the acquisition of private papers.

As a result of the existing repositories' inability to cope with the ever-increasing volume of records being created I suggested that it was absolutely essential to attempt to reduce the total volume of materials that must be cared for in our public repositories. To this end, larger, extant organizations such as labour unions, businesses, voluntary associations, school boards, and colleges should assume a greater financial responsibility for their own records. These organizations should be encouraged to 'act locally' in the preservation of their own records. This could take a number of forms including the establishment of in-house archival programs, development of co-operative or cost-shared arrangements with other organizations, or at the very least partnerships with existing repositories to help defray the cost of maintaining the records. While this raises other issues such as whether public repositories should maintain the records of profit-generating organizations -- I will leave that particular minefield for another day.

McDonald generally dismissed the idea of having agencies maintain their own archives. He felt that access would be hampered because the repositories would be "geographically disperse" and

"their conditions of access highly variable" and, finally, wondered what would become of the records when the creating agency no longer existed. For McDonald the key was to "find ways to maintain records in environments that are secure and accessible over time. He continued by suggesting that:

> ...for users, a highly decentralized structure of archival holdings is not only inconvenient but greatly diminishes their ability to follow leads from one record source to another, a voyage of discovery that larger institutions facilitate. To achieve long-term security of records and to create a working environment that allows research to be carried out effectively, some degree of centralization of expertise and materials is imperative.

McDonald suggested instead the establishment of regional centres "in a number of institutions - such as municipal archives, museums, and university or college libraries, as well as the British Columbia Archives and Records Service…" which would share responsibility for the collection of private records.

McDonald's suggestion for developing regional centres of public institutions with responsibility for acquiring private papers is from the perspective of conducting research very appealing. There are, however, several attendant difficulties. First, there are political considerations. From the outset there will be disputes as to the location of the regional centres. Once established, how are people going to feel about having private material acquired and maintained by regional centres several hundred miles down the highway? Perhaps this will help concentrate research material but will do little to stimulate the development of anything but the regional centre - a classic example of the rich getting richer. The most critical question in all of this is who will be responsible for funding this initiative. Would the handful of repositories across the province be expected to take on this task? I personally know of very few repositories with excess storage capacity and staffing that would allow them to assume this function in addition to their existing acquisition program. Would the provincial government be expected to fund this initiative? One has to appreciate that with additional storage requirements and staffing this would likely be a multi-million dollar proposition. If McDonald considers this a viable alternative to my suggestions then I would certainly wish him well in his lobby efforts.

Finally, I would like to conclude this section by referring to the discussion of "total archives" and the need for network development which appeared in the Wilson Report. On several occasions during his discussion of the acquisition of private papers this issue has been raised. In commenting on the decreasing activity in the acquisition of private papers McDonald observed that: this "trend represents a departure from the Canadian tradition of preserving government and private records in state-funded provincial and national archives" (I) McDonald with Turner suggested that "the Archives' managers have abandoned the concept of "total archives" in favour of a policy of "information management".

Historically, senior archives in Canada at the federal, provincial and territorial levels established for themselves broad mandates acquiring both the official records of their sponsoring agency and an

extensive range of private materials in all documentary forms bearing on the life of their institution or region. In assessing this "total archives" approach, the Wilson report pointed out that:

> In virtually every instance, these were the first professional archives in their regions and the impulse to gather all available archival material before neglect took its toll was as commendable as it was necessary. The arguments favouring a system of a few large centralized repositories are traditional and cogent." (64)

While acknowledging the importance of this total archives approach the Wilson report also recognized its practical implications. Like the Symons report before it the Wilson Report recognized the importance of encouraging the development of new repositories and the need to develop a co-ordinated archival system with increased institutional interdependence. Even at this time it was recognized that there were limits to reliance on the "total archives" approach. With the establishment of more institutions there would be an increased risk of overlapping acquisition mandates.

The Wilson report then articulated clearly the need to balance the 'total archives' approach with the development of new repositories. It went on to suggest that "the emergence of a true system of Canadian archives depends on a reinterpretation of the broad legislative mandates given each of the publicly funded archives" based on new developments in the archival community.

Although the report recognized that these public archives "have been given the responsibility by society to ensure the preservation of all records bearing on the history of that society" and that this "responsibility must remain" it cautioned that:

> ...the public archives must recognize that today far more is implied that simply gathering all available archival material into one repository. This responsibility can also be fulfilled by fostering the development of appropriate institutional, corporate or local archives. In so doing a much broader spectrum of historically important materials can be preserved, the full financial burden does not fall on the public purse, and the archives remain a living part of their institutional or local community."

I would argue that in British Columbia, the provincial archives has not so much abandoned the strict notion of 'total archives' as suggested by McDonald and Turner but rather moved toward the model envisaged by the Wilson Report - that is a shift from actually collecting private records to entering into partnerships and contributing toward their collection elsewhere. Unlike other provincial archives that have, to various degrees, reduced their activities in the acquisition of private papers, the British Columbia government has made funding available both to support the development and growth of a provincial archival network and to individual repositories within that network. While one might take issue with the amount of money expended on these activities or quibble about the guidelines for the distribution of the funds I very much support the basic underlying idea.

The 'total archives' approach was best suited to a period in which there were few archival repositories. As the Wilson Report strongly urges, the broad acquisition mandates implicit in the 'total archives' model must be carefully reassessed in light of changes in the archival environment, particularly the establishment of new repositories. This is not to suggest that the notion is no longer relevant but rather that we exercise flexibility in its application. It is wrong to invoke the spirit of 'total archives' to return to a bygone era in which one, or perhaps even a handful of regional public institutions should be expected to preserve the bulk of the province's private papers. Given the magnitude of the task of preserving private papers this is a responsibility that must be shared more generally amongst British Columbia's archival institutions.

By way of concluding my ramblings on the provincial archival community let me say that this discussion is both important and valuable. We have room in the community for many different points of view. The really positive aspect of this exchange is that we are taking the time to consider and discuss the various issues in the course of planning for future developments in the archival community. This foundation will ensure that decisions are rooted in consensus rather than simply historical happenstance.

I think that we can agree that the archival community has undergone some significant changes in the past decade. In recognition of these changes I would suggest that the time is appropriate to identify the current needs of the archival community. The last formal needs assessment survey was conducted over ten years ago. A new needs assessment survey would allow us to reorient our programs as necessary to ensure that they meet the needs of the community and that we deploy increasingly scarce resources in the most effective manner possible. I would respectfully suggest that the incoming executive consider seeking CCA and CAAP funding to carry out this new needs assessment survey.

As part of this project it might also be beneficial to conduct a review of the operations of the AABC. As the organization responsible for providing the leadership and the framework within which the community can work toward its goal of preserving the province's documentary heritage, it is critical that it be equal to the significant challenges at hand. In the past there has been some discussion about establishing a special committee for undertaking a thorough review of the operation of the Association and all of its programs. Is the current structure the one best suited to help the Association meet its obligations? Is the education program meeting the needs of the community? Is the current model employed for the delivery of the advisory services the best model or are there other alternatives? In that the scope of the Association's activities have expanded and become more complex - is it worth considering the establishment of an executive director position? There are many more things that could be suggested but I am offering these ideas only as examples of potential matters for consideration.

Looking to the future perhaps the two most important watchwords should be flexibility and communication. We should be flexible in our understanding and expectations of the archival community. This includes moving beyond the idea that a particular repository, or

small group of repositories, should have the primary responsibility for acquiring private papers. If this is the basic premise for the preservation of private materials what will happen in the inevitable circumstance where one or a number of these institutions is no longer in a position to acquire this material?

We must also continue to promote communication within the archival community. This includes sharing in an open and honest manner information about what each institution is actually acquiring. Developing an accurate picture of who is acquiring what material will help us better respond as a community to concerns about the disposition of private papers. Each archival institution must communicate effectively with their sponsoring agency. It is important that resource allocators understand the role to be played by archives and the importance of acquiring both sponsor and private records. The Association must look for ways to improve communications with the provincial government to ensure that the work of the AABC is understood and appreciated. While there were some positive aspects of the lobbying effort that had to be mounted a couple of years ago when it appeared that CAAP funding was in jeopardy, a lot of precious time was taken up on a campaign that should not have been necessary. Finally, we should engage in constructive dialogue with the full range of users of archives to better understand their requirements. We should be prepared to listen to their concerns and they, in turn, must be prepared to understand the constraints under which archivists operate.

Let me finish by returning to the title of my paper, "*Approaching the Millennium: Challenges and Prospects for British Columbia Archives.*" I have tried to suggest that the problems confronting archives in British Columbia are really little different than those faced by repositories elsewhere. The real difference lies in the manner in which we have chosen to respond to some of these challenges. Rather than having each repository deal with these problems on a piecemeal basis we have tried to develop an inclusive archival network and provide the educational opportunities to better equip the community as a whole to cope with these problems more efficiently. I believe that the B.C. model of using a union list as a basis for network development has been very successful as we now have a broad range of institutions that share a basic level of understanding and are willing and able to co-operate in a range of activities.

As we approach the millennium the challenges confronting the province's archival community will continue to grow as will new and unforeseen opportunities. We have taken the first and most important steps to meet these challenges by laying the foundation for inter-institutional co-operation and taking a more holistic approach to the preservation of the province's documentary heritage.