

The Theory of Reappraisal and Deaccessioning of Archival Material

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Abstract

A survey conducted by the National Archives of Canada in 1987 reported that out of 100 archival institutions surveyed, 65% of the respondents said that they regularly reappraise and deaccession collections. However, reappraisal constitutes a formal requirement for only 15% of those who do it. This thesis examines the theory, method and practice of reappraisal and deaccessioning.

Prior to the publication of Leonard Rapport's article "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records" in 1981, mention of reappraisal appeared infrequently in archival literature. Rapport's article presented attractive arguments for the reappraisal and deaccessioning of material in archival custody, and, since its appearance, the idea of appraisal as a one time activity to select documents for permanent preservation in an archival repository is seriously being questioned. A growing number of archivists are advocating reappraisal and deaccessioning as legitimate and necessary functions of archival work.

This thesis reviews the current literature regarding reappraisal and deaccessioning. It identifies and discusses the various arguments put forth for reappraisal and

deaccessioning, and assesses whether they are valid in terms of archival theory, methods and practice. Finally, it outlines a procedure for reappraisal and deaccessioning with consideration given to the legal, financial and administrative implications of reappraisal and deaccessioning.

This thesis concludes that systematic reappraisal is not a valid and justifiable archival activity, however, reappraisal and deaccessioning is sometimes warranted and necessary on a case by case basis.

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Introduction

Reappraisal and deaccessioning are relatively new terms that do not appear in standard professional glossaries or dictionaries but are encountered with increasing frequency in library, museum and archival literature. Until the 1980's, reappraisal and deaccessioning were not considered legitimate practices in archives and, if carried out, they were not publicized. In recent years, however, there has been a greater interest in removing material from archival repositories either to destroy it, to give it back to its creator or donor, or to transfer it to a more appropriate custodian. The causes of this interest are varied and so are the methods for determining what needs to be removed from a repository's custody. The main issue remains the legitimacy of the activity in the context of archival science and discipline. For this reason, a careful examination of reappraisal and deaccessioning needs to be conducted from a theoretical point of view, before it can be considered from the standpoint of method and practice. In order to proceed with such analysis it is necessary to first define the terms. Some writers use

the terms reappraisal and deaccessioning interchangeably, but they are two separate, but related activities.

The ideas of reappraisal and deaccessioning first appear in archival terminology under the term “withdrawal.” Included among the list of terms in a glossary published in The American Archivist in 1974 is the expression “permanent withdrawal” which is defined as the permanent transfer of records from the physical and legal custody of a repository. Although there is no reference to this activity in the archival manuals of the time, inclusion of the term in the glossary suggested that it was a practice in some archives.

The 1984 International Council on Archives’ (ICA) Dictionary of Archival Terminology does not include reappraisal or deaccessioning among the terms it defines. It does however provide a reference from “deaccessioning” to “withdrawal,” which is defined as “the return of documents from the physical and legal custody of archives to the creating agency or its successors or in the case of deposited private records/archives to their owner.”¹

¹ Peter Walne, ed. Dictionary of Archival Terminology. (Munich: K.G. Saur, 1984).

“Reappraisal” and “deaccessioning” both appear in the Society of American Archivists (SAA) Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators and Records Managers, compiled by Lewis J. and Lynn Lady Bellardo in 1992. Reappraisal is defined as “the process of reevaluating the holdings of an archives or manuscript repository to determine which holdings should be deaccessioned.”² This definition refers to the intellectual activity, reevaluation, and its practical purpose and outcome, continued retention or deaccessioning. The Bellardo’s definition also makes reference to “retention review” as a synonym of reappraisal. It is unclear whether the term retention review concerns the routine review of retention schedules made in connection with appraisal or the periodic review of archival holdings.

The National Archives of Canada defines reappraisal as the activity that “allows archivists to re-evaluate appraisal decisions based upon current and traditional archival practices, principles and procedures. The result is to determine whether and in what way a record continues to meet the National Archives of Canada’s selection criteria or whether the records should be deaccessioned.”³ This definition is very similar to the American one but more specific. In fact

² Lewis J. Bellardo and Lynn Lady Bellardo. A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators and Records Managers (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992), 28.

³ National Archives of Canada, Acquisition Evaluation Study (Ottawa: National Archives of Canada, 1988), vol. III, 157.

it establishes the criteria for retention or deaccessioning decisions, criteria which must be only the National Archives of Canada's selection criteria.

Reappraisal is necessarily related to appraisal and to the concepts of use and value. The SAA's glossary defines appraisal as "the process of determining the value and thus the disposition of records based upon their current administrative, legal, and fiscal use; their evidential and informational value; their arrangement and condition; their intrinsic value; and their relationship to other records."⁴ Reappraisal is the re-evaluation of these uses and values and, by extension, of the appraisal decisions that were made in the past, either recent or remote.

In order to reappraise archival material it must first be established that the documents were appraised when accepted in custody. There should be evidence that a decision was made to take all or some of the records aggregation (fonds or part thereof) into custody of the archives, whether by statutory authority or by deed or agreement. Ideally, all archival material is appraised before it is accepted into the custody of an archival institution. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Sometimes a systematic and rigorous appraisal is not conducted. Archival institutions may accept records into custody, accession them, and leave them in storage for

⁴ Bellardo, Glossary for Archivists, 2.

many years without appraising, arranging or describing them. They may also acquire material, process it, and make it available without making any evaluative decision about it, sometimes because of the “collector” or “antiquarian” mindset of the archivist, at other times because of specific agreements with donors, or because of an indiscriminating institutional approach.

In cases where it can be established that the material was acquired and accessioned without conducting a proper appraisal, the appraisal carried out at a later date does not constitute reappraisal. It should instead be considered “deferred appraisal.” Deferred appraisal is appraisal conducted after the material has been accepted into archival custody without making any express decision regarding its value and the length of time it or its parts will be kept in the archival repository.

Related to and often confused with reappraisal is the notion of phased appraisal or appraisal in stages. Phased appraisal takes place when an archival institution establishes a timetable for its appraisal decisions. Different selection criteria usually apply to different phases in the life cycle of documents. For example, the British system for public records includes an initial appraisal

after five years for the closure of files based on administrative and legal use and a second appraisal after 25 years based on research value.⁵

If a decision is made to remove previously accessioned material after the reassessment of the uses and values of documents in archival custody, a specific procedure follows which is known as "deaccessioning." The Australian archival manual Keeping Archives defines deaccessioning as "the process of removing material from the care and custody of archives because: the material has been reappraised and found to be unsuitable for the archives' collections, because the legal owner wants it back, or because there has been an agreement to transfer it to another repository."⁶

One of the most thorough explanations of deaccessioning is that given in the policy manual of the Archives of Ontario:

⁵ Great Britain, Parliament. Report of the Committee on Departmental Records. Cmnd. 9163, July 1954.

⁶ Ann Pederson, ed. Keeping Archives (Sydney: Australian Society of Archivists Incorporated, 1987), 359.

Deaccessioning is the formal act which allows an institution to remove material permanently, in whole or in part, from its holdings. Deaccessioning often occurs when an archival institution redefines or more strictly enforces its mandate or carries out systematic reappraisal of its holdings. It may also be a recourse when storage and conservation costs become excessive. Material with local significance may also be de-accessioned to permit its legal and physical transfer to a more appropriate repository although long-term loans are the preferred method of dealing with these situations.⁷

This explanation demonstrates that deaccessioning is a formal act requiring specific and clear procedures, and cannot be confused with the decision making process that necessarily precedes it.

If accessioning is "the process of formally accepting and recording the receipt of records into archival custody,"⁸ deaccessioning is the formal process of physically, legally and intellectually removing documents from archival custody and the recording of it. Custody is the

⁷ Archives of Ontario Manual of Policy and Procedure. (Toronto: Archives of Ontario, 1991): 13.1.

⁸ Ann Pederson, ed. Keeping Archives 355.

“responsibility for the care of documents based on their physical possession.”⁹ It does not always include legal ownership or the right to control access to records. Deaccessioning however is always a legal act and this is the reason why the legal removal from archival custody should be part of its definition.

Deaccessioning most often occurs when a reappraisal decision finds some documents to be unsuitable for continued retention. It is often the consequence of value judgements but sometimes it is linked to specific practical circumstances. For instance, some material might have been lost or damaged beyond repair or its legal owner wishes to have it back (a rare occurrence now that archives usually acquire legal ownership of the material.) In these cases, the archivist proceeds with deaccessioning without re-evaluation of previous appraisal judgements. On the contrary, the act of reappraisal requires that a re-evaluation of previously made judgements be conducted. Such re-evaluation may or may not result in the deaccessioning of the documents in question and yet its legitimacy needs to be questioned in addition to its reasons, purposes, methods, and practices.

⁹ Bellardo, Glossary for Archivists 9.

This thesis will discuss the concept of reappraisal beginning with an analysis of the archival literature on the subject, and proceeding with an examination of reappraisal in the archival context in order to determine whether it is a philosophically sound archival practice.

It will then examine the various proposals put forth for reappraisal in order to determine whether they are reappraisal issues and, if so whether reappraisal is appropriate or inappropriate. Finally, it will outline a procedure for reappraisal, highlighting some of the administrative, legal and ethical considerations that must be addressed when reappraising and deaccessioning material from archives. The aim of the study is to determine whether reappraisal is justifiable archival activity and how it should properly be conducted.

chapter 1

The Idea of Reappraisal

Archival literature dealing specifically with reappraisal is very limited. The small amount that does exist is written almost exclusively in a North American context and most of it in the form of case studies. A number of archivists however have recently advocated reappraisal as a practical and necessary solution to the problems caused by past acquisitions of material that should never have become part of an institution's holdings or that are deemed no longer worthy of retention. Despite the growing interest in reappraisal there is a noticeable absence of any critical inquiry or theoretical examination of the concept itself or of the reasons generating the need for such activity.

Leonard Rapport's 1981 article "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records" was the first archival piece to deal specifically with the issue of reappraisal. It established a

rationale for reappraisal.¹⁰ Prior to its publication, reappraisal and deaccessioning were generally considered anti-archival activities, unacceptable to professionals whose mission in part is permanent preservation and custodianship of archival materials. In most of the literature on appraisal there was an implicit assumption that appraisal determined an irrevocable decision, and that documents selected for retention in an archives would be held permanently.

Rapport's article addressed a problem that many archives appeared to be facing: stacks filled with records of questionable value, many of which should never have been acquired, and some of whose value had diminished over time. Rapport expressed his belief that if these records were offered to an archival repository today they would not be accepted. If they would not be accepted today, he argued, then why should we bother to keep them? He concluded that it is the archivist's responsibility to identify these records and dispose of them. The way to accomplish this is through the periodic and systematic reappraisal and consequent deaccessioning of documents in archival custody. Rapport's article established a number of attractive arguments for reappraisal, and set the tone for future discussion and debate on the topic.

¹⁰ Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," The American Archivist 44, no. 2 (Spring 1981): 143-150.

Rapport stated that it is easier to understand how so many records of questionable value were acquired than it is to understand archivists' reluctance or inability to dispose of them. The prime reason for the present situation, he argues, is that faulty appraisal decisions were made in the past. Beyond that, he contends that even if past appraisers might have judged the documents correctly by the standards of the day, if they are not worthy of retention on the basis of current standards, they should not be kept.

A second reason why archives have acquired so many valueless records is archivists' over-emphasis on selection of records on the basis of their evidential value. Rapport disputes Schellenberg's recommendations that records containing evidence of the structure of the creating organization and its functions and activities be preserved regardless of whether there is an immediate or even a foreseeable use for them. He also disagrees with the argument that records should be acquired if they constitute "the proof of each agency's faithful stewardship of the responsibilities delegated to it and the accounting that every important public official owes to the people whom he serves." He contends that,

If we could audit the documents brought into the National Archives and, probably, into other public archives, with proof of stewardship as a justification, I would venture to say that most—probably 90 percent or more—have since their arrival, never been looked at by a human eye. Further, I would guess that no matter how long we retain

these predominantly evidential records, most are not going to be looked at by anybody.¹¹

Rapport believes that a large number of records of questionable value were also acquired for the sake of expediency. He cites a number of examples from the National Archives as evidence of that occurrence, claiming that archivists, often under pressure from records creators, end up keeping records they should not have accepted in the first place. Rapport argues that the absence of strong legislation has not provided any recourse other than to accept material reluctantly. Finally he alleges that archives sometimes accept inappropriate or valueless material in order to ensure that they will receive valuable and pertinent material in the future from the same source.

Rapport makes a number of suppositions for which he offers no evidence other than his own opinion about why archivists continue to keep material they know or suspect to be of dubious value. He thinks that there is a perception that the public announcement of the existence of archival material in finding aids is a statement of its permanent value. There are archivists who believe that the credibility of the institution would be jeopardized if that material already made publicly available were to be removed from its holdings. Rapport also thinks that the archivists responsible for acquiring the questionable material might be sensitive about having their

¹¹ Rapport, 149.

decisions reversed. He believes that archivists develop personal attachment to the records they acquire and process, making disposal difficult. He alleges that there is a mystique about certain types of records. In his experience, documents related to shipping and railway activities for example are almost impossible to destroy. Finally, Rapport suggests that archivists might be wary about emptying stack areas because it might mean the permanent loss of space availability within that division or repository.

Rapport proposes that archivists conduct systematic reappraisals of accessioned records at regular intervals. A time lag of twenty or thirty years after the initial appraisal would provide sufficient time for the archival institution to publish and circulate descriptions of the records and to analyze what uses, if any, are made of the records.

As reflected in his remarks about the acquisition of documents on the basis of evidential value Rapport selects his criteria for reappraisal primarily on the basis of use: past, actual, and anticipated use. He urges archivists to look at how frequently the records have been used in the past and to establish whether or not there is reasonable (not conceivable) expectation that they will be used in the future. If they have not been used or it is not expected that they will be used, then there is little point in continuing to keep them.

While there has not been any thorough analysis or debate of Rapport's arguments in favour of reappraisal, there have been a number of critiques of some arguments put forth in his article.¹²

There is general consensus that archives have in the past acquired too much material of questionable value and that something must now be done to address the problem. Most archivists are writing in favour of reappraisal but there is little agreement among them on the circumstances in which reappraisal is necessary or how it should be conducted.

In what is ostensibly a critique of Rapport's arguments Karen Benedict agrees with Rapport that archives have acquired records that should not have been accepted among their holdings in the first place. She objects however to the use of reappraisal as a collection management tool, that is, as a way of dealing with the overabundance of records of questionable value held by archives.

Benedict's objection to wide scale use of reappraisal as collection management tool is based on the concern that this approach be viewed as a crisis management technique and might seriously

12. Karen Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning as Collection Management Tools in an Archives -- A Reply to Leonard Rapport," American Archivist 47 (winter 1984): 43-49.

undermine archival programs leading to the dismantling of archival collections.¹³ This type of activity sends signals to the people who administer archival budgets and control archival institutions that it is acceptable to eliminate parts of archival collections whenever there is a need to economize.

Benedict's main point of contention with Rapport concerns his notion of faulty appraisal. She argues that archivists cannot be totally confident that they have found valueless material acquired on the basis of wrong criteria or of a wrong appreciation of the right criteria. The fact that something might be perceived by one archivist as being the result of an erroneous appraisal by another may be the simple consequence of disagreement on the attribution of archival value:

Thus, unless an institution's collection policies and appraisal criteria were generally unsound, their accessioning defines their archival values; and their policies should be maintained despite the opinion of later evaluators that a mistake was made in a specific case. Since our view of what is of enduring value changes constantly, to permit regular reappraisal (actually re-judgement) is to sanction the destruction of records according to transitory criteria.¹⁴

¹³Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire," 45.

¹⁴Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire," 45.

Benedict disagrees with Rapport's conception of the value of archives as being strictly related to their use, and with his idea that the archivist's goal should be to assess the research value of the material in question against the cost of maintaining it in an archives. She also finds fault with Rapport's two main criteria for reappraisal: past and future use. She puts forth that frequency of use is not a valid determinant of the archival or research value of records. It is a historical and anti-intellectual to determine that, because a group of records has not been used within a limited period of time, those records are valueless and should be discarded.

Benedict further cautions that to consider reasonable expectation of use the determining factor in a retention decision simply substitutes the value judgement of a later appraisal for an earlier one. What is needed is the development of sound appraisal criteria and further education for archivists to ensure that they understand the importance of carefully evaluating the records in the first place.

Like Benedict, Irish archivist Sean McMenemy is in agreement with Rapport that archives have acquired too much material of questionable value over the years and attributes much of the responsibility to poor transfer procedures.¹⁵ Archivists were often working against time,

¹⁵ Sean C. McMenemy, "Reappraisal: Reflections on Rapport," in Proceedings of a Society of Archivists in-service training course held by the Records Management Group at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, England, 21-23 September, 1983.

had to take all or nothing, and, until recently, did not have records centres to act as "filters", where records of limited or short term value could be kept until their final disposition.

Although he does not specifically call it faulty appraisal, McMenamin believes that the abundance of records of little value among archival holdings is due to the fact that appraisal was often conducted without sufficient knowledge and a perspective that is acquired only through the passage of time. Despite the fact that they object to Rapport's argument that reappraisal should become a regular and systematic archival activity collections management, both Benedict and McMenamin advocate it under certain circumstances.

Benedict asserts that there is a limited but important role for reappraisal and deaccessioning as part of the initial appraisal. When a fonds or series is being considered for acquisition by an archives, one appraisal consideration should be how the records in question relate to documents already held by the archives. The archivist should select the records having the greatest research value and perhaps eliminate those already held by the institution that are of a more limited value and no longer necessary as evidence of the same facts or events documented by the new acquisitions. By doing so archival repositories can eliminate a lot of the bulk. Benedict agrees with Rapport that there are instances of severe space shortages where it might be necessary to remove some material in order to eliminate some redundancy.

She proposes however, that alternate solutions, such as transfer to another medium, such as microfilm, be found.

By contrast, Sean McMenamin sees the potential for reappraisal as a way of correcting past appraisal decisions made without adequate knowledge. In order to make more informed appraisal decisions he proposes a method where each class (or series) of records is graded in a broad, subjective assessment. Records judged as having little value would be ranked at the bottom of the scale and those perceived as having significant value being placed at the high end. He proposes that archivists periodically evaluate documents based on their ranking. This would permit comparative rather than absolute judgements based on more complete information.¹⁶ Moreover, the passage of time would provide the necessary critical distance from the issues of which the records constitute evidence. This improved perspective would result in better appraisal decision. McMenamin warns that this procedure might cause some archivists to be careless in their first judgement, leaving the responsibility of making difficult appraisal decisions to their successors.¹⁷

¹⁶ McMenamin, 120.

¹⁷ McMenamin, 120.

McMenamin's proposal echoes much of the British practice as it established itself after the publication of the 1954 Report on the Committee on Departmental Records commonly, and hereafter, called the Grigg Report.¹⁸ This study analyzed and presented recommendations for changing both the constitutional position of the Public Records Office and the procedure by which records were selected for retention. It presents an historical overview of the development of records disposition in the British record keeping system and the evolution of policies regarding the selection, on-going retention and destruction of public records.

As early as 1836 there had been recognition in Great Britain that there were "large masses of documents that are utterly useless to anybody for any purpose."¹⁹ A request to build a new storage wing at the Public Records Office (PRO) was turned down by the Treasury Board on the grounds that it would not authorize any further expenditure until it was satisfied that what had been deposited at the PRO was worth preserving. Again in 1875, the Deputy Keeper at the PRO wrote that there were "extant in the PRO large masses of legal and government documents that are wholly useless for legal, historical, military, statistical, economical, or official purposes and of no possible interest to anyone."²⁰

¹⁸ Report of the Committee on Departmental Records, 15.

¹⁹ Report of the Committee on Departmental Records, 15.

As a way of dealing with the chronic problem of acquisition of records of questionable value and with the ever-growing mass of public records, the Grigg Report outlined a procedure whereby documents would be appraised in stages. It was recommended that departments conduct a first appraisal of their records no later than five years after they are no longer useful for administrative purposes. This appraisal would be based primarily on administrative needs. The records selected from this initial review would then be subject to a second appraisal twenty five years later;²¹ the passage of time and the acquisition of historical perspective on facts and events would make evident the historical value of the records. The Grigg Report's idea of phased appraisal, like McMenemy's grading proposal, is markedly different from Leonard Rapport's suggestion that records be repeatedly appraised at intervals of twenty or thirty years.

This notion of phased appraisal and the problems that arise in the on-going transfer of government records has been recently addressed by Sheila Powell in a case study of the transfer of immigration case files to the National Archives of Canada.²² Powell observes that most arguments in support of archival reappraisal are primarily related to issues of archival custody

²⁰ Report of the Committee on Departmental Records, 30.

²¹ Report of the Committee on Departmental Records, 30

²² Sheila Powell, "Archival Reappraisal: The Immigration Case Files," *Archivaria* 33 (winter 1991-92): 104-116.

and research use. Fonds should be deaccessioned when they pose problems due to their extent or infrequent use. Reappraisal is an appraisal issue and not a custodial or reference issue.

While she agrees that archives have acquired many of the wrong records in the past, Powell does not espouse the idea that this occurred as a result of poor value judgements. She observes that "archival appraisal decisions are often influenced by issues that have little to do with archival value, and which can result in incomplete appraisal decisions."²³ She feels that incomplete or incorrect appraisal decisions occur largely as a result of the archivist's inability or lack of opportunity to arrive at a complete understanding of the total informational context in which the records are created and used.

In the case of the Department of Immigration case files, other external factors presented further impediments to the appraisal process. Using the examples of the Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals (the Deschene Commission), which criticized the Federal Government for destroying records, and of the introduction of the federal Privacy Act in 1983, Powell illustrated how external political, social, legal and administrative factors have an impact on the volume and kinds of records that are retained.

²³Powell, 105.

Powell contended that reappraisal is a necessary and important part of the total appraisal process. It should take the form of a new appraisal using knowledge gained since the original one and using criteria based on sound knowledge. She concludes by saying that there is a greater need for more informed appraisal decisions and optimistically suggests that "as our approach to appraisal improves, the need for reappraisal should begin to disappear." This will not happen until archivists are given the necessary resources and authority to conduct sound appraisal in the first place, and until working-level archivists are able to share more of their ideas and information with their colleagues.²⁴

In a commentary on Powell's ideas, Paul Banfield observes that reappraisal and deaccessioning are still very much reaction driven and have little to do with archival value.²⁵ His statement is confirmed by a number of case studies that have appeared in recent years on wide-scale appraisal that suggest that reappraisal is initiated as a result of crisis situations.

This use of reappraisal as a solution to a specific problem is evident in case studies presented by Richard Haas at the University of Cincinnati and Karyl Winn at the University of Washington.

²⁴Powell, 115.

²⁵ Paul Banfield, "Having Second Thoughts: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning, (Paper presented at Association of Canadian Archivists Conference, 25 May 1991, Banff, Alberta), 6.

The impetus for conducting reappraisal at the University of Cincinnati came when the university had to carry out immediate renovations on the building that housed the archives. In its plans to relocate to temporary storage, the archives found that the new storage facilities would retain only 4/5 of its holdings. At this time, it was decided to reevaluate the archival holdings to determine whether the space they occupied was warranted.²⁶ The material was analyzed largely on the basis of past use, determination of historical importance of the material to the university and pertinent legal requirements. Using these criteria they were able to determine which material could be deaccessioned from their holdings. The immediate benefit to the institution was undoubtedly the fact that material regarded to be valueless was removed from archival custody. Among the long-term benefits resulting from the exercise—according to Richard Haas—was on-the-job appraisal training and a renewed focus on collection management rather than an expansion of the holdings.²⁷

A strong supporter of Leonard Rapport's arguments for reappraisal, University of Washington archivist, Karyl Winn, suggests that archivists deal with the "junk" that they have acquired over

²⁶ Richard Haas, "Collection Reappraisal: The Experience at the University of Cincinnati," American Archivist 47 (winter 1984), 53.

²⁷ Haas, 53.

the years but continue to retain because of inertia and preservation instincts.²⁸ Calling reappraisal the "housekeeping most of us want to do systematically, but rarely manage to do,"²⁹ Winn proposes that records be deaccessioned when there has been a change in the institution's acquisitions scope, when the material in question does not have archival value, or if better evidence of the same facts and events is available to the archives. Like Rapport, Winn is a strong advocate of deaccessioning if the documents are not being used. However, she does acknowledge that there may be legitimate reasons why the documents are not being used and this should be taken into consideration.

Some cases of reappraisal have occurred as a result of refining the institution's acquisition policy. In a 1991 paper presented at the Association of Canadian Archivists annual conference, Susan Kooyman recounted a wide-scale reappraisal exercise conducted at the Glenbow Museum and Archives in Calgary, Alberta.³⁰ The impetus stemmed from a plan to prepare an on-line data base consisting of fonds level descriptions of all of the institution's archival holdings. Recognizing that some of their archival holdings consisted of material that should

²⁸ Karyl Winn, "Retrospective Appraisal: Or Good Housekeeping in the Manuscripts Collection," in Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice: Proceedings of the Joint Meeting of the Association of British Columbia Archivists at the Northwest Archivists Association. Vancouver, April 26-28, 1990.

²⁹ Winn, 117.

³⁰ Susan Kooyman, "Reappraisal and Deaccessioning at the Glenbow Archives," (Paper presented at Association of Canadian Archivists conference, Banff Alberta, 25 May 1991).

not have been acquired, or that not fall within their collecting scope, the Glenbow decided to undertake a full-scale review and dispose of selected material.

Owing to the fact that the institution was born out of the efforts of an overzealous collector without any defined collecting focus, there was a substantial amount of material that did not reflect the institution's current acquisition mandate in any way. The goal of the Glenbow project was to improve the quality of the holdings of the institution and Kooyman claimed that weeding out the material which did not fit the current acquisition policy would not mislead researchers.

Few archivists have considered the ethical implications of reappraising documents in their custody. Shelly Sweeney addresses some of these issues in discussing material donated by private individuals.³¹ Like many other advocates of reappraisal Sweeney argues that there is need for reappraisal because of flawed appraisal decisions made in the past. She expresses concern over the way in which reappraisal is handled and suggests practical guidelines that might circumvent some of the potential problems arising from reappraisal and deaccessioning. She calls for rigorous standards, defining guidelines as to when reappraisal should be

³¹ Shelly Sweeney, "But I Have Promises to Keep: the Ethics of Deaccessioning," (Paper presented at Association of Canadian Archivists conference, Banff, Alberta, 25 May 1991).

undertaken and what factors should enter into the reappraisal decision; she believes that such decisions should be conducted by a committee and that donors or next of kin should be contacted to discuss the decision. Detailed records should be kept documenting the decisions for reappraisal and the method of disposal.

There is a very strong belief that the donors or original owners of material to be deaccessioned should be contacted and possibly be permitted to have the material returned to them. This idea prevails in the majority of discussions concerning the disposal of deaccessioned material. It is reflected in the 1987 National Archives study on reappraisal and deaccessioning, perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of reappraisal and deaccessioning to date. This study revealed that there was a great deal of concern among users regarding the possible disposal of holdings.

It is as a result of some of these concerns that a clause concerning deaccessioning was included in the Association of Canadian Archivists "Code of Ethics." This clause states that archivists should make every effort to contact the donors or their representatives and to inform them of the decision to deaccession material. It further suggests that archivists endeavour to offer the records to other repositories in preference to destruction.³²

³² Association of Canadian Archivists, Code of Ethics, (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists) n.d.

The above mentioned National Archives acquisition evaluation study revealed some other important information about reappraisal and deaccessioning. The study was conducted by the National Archives of Canada between April 1987 and January 1988. The study, designed to support the development of a National Archives acquisition policy, addressed the rationale and policy implications of a broad range of acquisition related issues, including reappraisal and deaccessioning.

One of the objectives of the study was to examine the use of reappraisal and deaccessioning as management tools. A sample of Canadian archives representing various sizes and types of archives from across the country was surveyed. The methodology employed included interviews with members of the focus group, literature reviews, and a cost benefit analysis.

Of the 100 institutions responding to the National Archives survey, 65% of the respondents said that they do reappraise their holdings. However, reappraisal constitutes a formal requirement guided by policy and procedures for only 15% of those who do it.³³ Those surveyed who did not reappraise material stated that, if appraisal was conducted properly initially, reappraisal would not be necessary.

³³ National Archives of Canada. Acquisition Evaluation Study. vol II, 4.

The study considered reappraisal and deaccessioning as two separate but related functions and with the input of focus groups, looked at the impetus, the benefits, and procedures for each. In their examination of reappraisal, the focus group identified a number of circumstances where a decision to reappraise might take place; when a complete initial appraisal did not take place, when inappropriate material was included in a legitimate acquisition, when an inappropriate acquisition was made, for conservation reasons, when new and more appropriate repositories are established, and when space is at a premium.³⁴

Among the benefits of reappraisal identified by the focus group were: a better use of space; reduction of backlogs, better accessibility of holdings through better organization and contextual information, improved conservation, improved relations with other archives, and better allocation of resources.³⁵

The study also examined the process and costs of conducting reappraisal and deaccessioning. While they identified many measurable costs such as salaries, time and supplies, there were a

³⁴ National Archives of Canada, Acquisition Evaluation Study, vol III, 162.

³⁵ National Archives of Canada, Acquisition Evaluation Study, vol. III, 157.

wide range of unmeasurable costs including research value costs, donor displeasure, adverse publicity, collections destroyed, and legal costs.³⁶ The costs associated with reappraisal and deaccessioning were dependent upon the nature and extent of the material in question and varied greatly from case to case. The study concluded that while reappraisal and deaccessioning are "useful tools for the more effective management of holdings, their cost effectiveness could not have been demonstrated within the scope of this evaluation."

The National Archives was also concerned with the public perception of reappraisal and deaccessioning. As part of the study, a group of selected researchers including university historians, academics, public historians, a professional genealogist, and print and broadcast media representatives representing each of the different regions of Canada were interviewed. The members of the group were asked to comment on how their research would be affected by a policy of archival reappraisal at the National Archives of Canada if it resulted in a transfer of material to other Canadian archives, a return of holdings to the donor, a sale of material, or the destruction of some records. The response was a commonly held belief that transfer from the National Archives to other repositories might be beneficial under certain conditions such as the existence of a national archival data base, a reinforcement of thematic concentrations, the

³⁶ National Archives of Canada, Acquisition Evaluation Study, vol. III, 177.

return of local records to the regions, and the presence of high levels of service in the receiving institution.

A quarter of the survey respondents opposed actual transfer and expressed preference for microfilm copies, arguing that "users must not be forced to travel to many regional archives in order to obtain a national point of view."³⁷ Strong opposition was voiced regarding the return of material to the donor or sale of unwanted material. Consideration was given to the destruction of material but only after a very rigorous review of its research significance, preferably by a committee of archives users.

Reappraisal is increasingly being advocated as a regular archival activity and an integral part of collections management. This is very apparent in recently published archival manuals, such as the latest Society of American Archivists basic manual on appraisal which contains an entire chapter on reappraisal and deaccessioning. Its author Gerald Ham alleges that many archivists have come to realize that "a systematic and continuing procedure to reevaluate past appraisal and acquisition decisions is essential to developing a program with strong well-focused

³⁷ National Archives of Canada. Acquisition Evaluation Study, vol. II, 32.

holdings that makes wise use of preservation holdings.”³⁸ Like Rapport, he considers reappraisal to be a collections management tool to improve holdings and amplify resources that should be an on-going function rather than a crisis management weapon.³⁹ The chapter provides little guidance for identifying material that could be reappraised, focusing instead on identifying methods of disposal and dealing with the potential negative repercussions of deaccessioning.

More often, the concept of reappraisal is referred to in general discussions about appraisal and archival value. In James Gregory Bradsher’s Managing Archives and Archival Institutions, he argues that “archives are the small core of records with enduring value...all records have some value to somebody. However, generally only those of sufficient value, as determined by archivists, are retained as archives, and only then as long as their value is of an enduring nature. Archives are thus retained or preserved indefinitely, but not necessarily permanently; the information contained in them is subject to re-evaluation to determine if they warrant continued retention.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Gerald Ham, Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993): 91.

³⁹ Ham, 94.

⁴⁰ James Gregory Bradsher, ed. Managing Archives and Archival Institutions, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988): 4.

In the same manual, Maygene Daniels suggests that archival institutions should anticipate that decisions will be made that later in the light of new information or "future considerations".

"We need to be able to reappraise holdings on a systematic basis in order to identify records that have been appraised erroneously or brought into the archives without an appropriate appraisal."⁴¹

There is a general consensus that archives are filled with material of questionable value. The literature suggests that there is a widely accepted belief that reappraisal is a valid and necessary archival practice; a way of doing "housekeeping most of us wish to do systematically but rarely manage to do."⁴² It has been suggested as a collections management tool that should be used to correct flawed appraisal decisions made in the past, to remove records that are no longer being used, and to remove duplicate fonds or collections. Some of the strongest proponents for reappraisal like Gerald Ham, Sean McMenamin and Karyl Winn argue that reappraisal should be conducted on a regular and systematic basis. This consensus, however, rests on some assumptions that need further examination. For instance, that archives should be retained

⁴¹ Bradsher, 66.

⁴² Karyl Winn, 117.

only as long as they are being used, that reappraisal is required to correct erroneous appraisal decisions made in the past, and that acquisition and accessioning of archival documents into an archives collection does not imply that the material will be preserved permanently. The following chapter will discuss these issues in light of archival theory.

chapter 2

Is Systematic Reappraisal Justified?

There has been some discussion in literature regarding reappraisal and deaccessioning about criteria for the identification of material that should be reappraised. Few writers, however, have dealt with the validity of reappraisal in the context of archival science. The literature also reveals that despite differences in circumstances, and the procedure under which reappraisal and deaccessioning is conducted, there is support for the idea that they are necessary and valid archival activities and that they should be conducted on a regular and systematic basis. If this is the case, then all documents acquired by archives would be subject to periodic re-evaluation and possible deaccessioning, suggesting that the concept of permanent value no longer applies to archival documents.

The idea of permanence and the assumption that archives acquire documents for permanent preservation is of central importance to the reappraisal debate. Traditionally appraisal practices have been guided by the belief that certain documents were worthy of selection for permanent preservation in archives. As the activity of reappraisal necessarily involves the reassessment or re-evaluation of appraisal decisions made in the past, this act necessarily challenges the previous notions or concepts of permanence which have guided archivists' work. If appraisal is the analysis and attribution of values, should those value decisions be considered permanent? If archival documents no longer possess permanent value as archivists once believed, then reappraisal is a philosophically sound and justifiable archival activity. However, if the concept of permanent value still applies, is reappraisal on either a systematic or cases by case basis justified? This chapter will address the concept of reappraisal in the context of archival science in order to determine whether it is theoretically and philosophically justified.

North American literature on appraisal suggests that the concept of permanent value has changed over the last twenty years. Frank Evans' 1974 glossary included the term "permanent value" in the definition of "archival value" which was defined as the "determination in appraisal that records are worthy of indefinite or permanent preservation by an archival agency."⁴³ In

⁴³ Evans, 114.

more recent years the term "permanent" has been replaced with less absolute terms such as "lasting value," "enduring value" or "indefinite value". The substitution of these terms suggests that the selection and preservation of archival documents may be for a limited period of time and, in a sense, releases the archivist from any eternal obligation to the records acquired. This changing attitude is reflected in much of the recent archival literature on acquisition and appraisal including the recent SAA manual on appraisal in which Gerald Ham states:

"accessioning should not entail an eternal obligation on the part of the repository - the changing mission, other accessions and financial responsibilities may preclude perpetual obligation."⁴⁴ Ham's observation was echoed by a number of other archivists including Maynard Brichford who observed that "increasingly, we will look on archival custody as a limited term activity—a stewardship over documentation held for specific periods of research use. Few record series are of permanent value. Many will attract users in twenty-five or fifty years or never."⁴⁵

In their institutional procedures manual, the Archives of Ontario has suggested that reappraisal and deaccessioning occur on the basis of the material lacking archival or permanent value.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Gerald Ham, 94.

⁴⁵ Maynard Brichford, "Seven Sinful Thoughts," American Archivist 43 (winter 1984): 15.

⁴⁶ Archives of Ontario Policy Manual, 13.1.

This reflects the argument for reappraisal on the basis that the initial appraisal was done according to standards of the time but that standards have changed and, by today's standards, the material is no longer worth keeping.⁴⁷ All suggest that the concept of permanence no longer applies to material acquired by archives.

Did archivists ever believe that the material they acquired and preserved in archives had permanent value? At one time, "archival value" implied preservation in an archives with no definite time frame. Archivists worked under the implicit assumption that the documents that they were selecting for archival retention would be held permanently. Recent literature suggests that the permanency of past appraisal decisions has come into question. This challenge to the concept of permanence may be rooted in three main issues: technological changes in the way records are created, used, and maintained, the cost of maintaining an increasing volume of records, and the belief that archives must be used in order to justify their retention. Recent changes and developments in these areas have caused archivists to question the commitment to the permanent retention of records already in their custody and to records they are considering acquiring.

⁴⁷ Rapport, 144.

In his article "On the Idea of Permanence", James O'Toole traces the evolution of the use of the term "permanent" in the North American archival context; a term which he suggests has been more complicated and relative than absolute. O'Toole argues that this word has had many different meanings for archivists over the last century. At one time, the belief that material had permanent value was very much a factor in the acquisition and preservation of material in the 19th century. The intention of the people working within early North American archives was to "preserve the manuscripts of the present day to the remotest ages of posterity."⁴⁸ They endeavoured to ensure the indefinite preservation of these documents by using special storage containers and sought locations for storage facilities that would provide "a place of deposit for articles intended to be preserved for ages."⁴⁹

Recognizing the fact that, despite their best efforts to preserve the early documents, these objects were susceptible to permanent damage, archivists gradually became more concerned with preserving the information contained in the documents rather than the preservation of the physical object. This move resulted in widespread documentary publishing and copying of material for the purposes of diffusion and perpetuation of the information. As a result,

⁴⁸ James O'Toole, "On the Idea of Permanence," American Archivist 52 (winter 1989): 10-25.

⁴⁹ O'Toole, 15.

documentary publishing flourished, records were copied by hand or even photographed, and later, microfilming and other copy techniques were introduced.

By the turn of the century developments of conservation techniques and procedures sparked a renewed interest in the preservation of the original document. As William J. Barrow stated: "there may have been a significant psychological predisposition in favour of preserving and repairing the original documents and of not being satisfied with...substitutes...copies are never totally satisfactory...for the unique originals possess unique and desirable characteristics lost in copying."⁵⁰ Whether this was, as O'Toole suggests, a reflection of the advancements in conservation processes that could conceivably preserve the original document or the desire to preserve the original papers which is what had attracted many archivists to the profession in the first place, it marked the beginning of a long and costly effort to preserve original documents. With this change in attitude the emphasis returned to the permanent preservation of the physical object from the preservation of the information contained in the object returned. Increasingly, the term "permanent" acquired a new meaning and permanence in an archival context had a physical connotation. As the volume of records generated by society increased archivists and conservators acknowledged that they were fighting a losing battle. They had the

⁵⁰ O'Toole, 17.

technical expertise to preserve the records permanently but given the volume of records they were dealing with, they recognized that it was an impossible task given the time and resources that would ever conceivably be available.

By the late 1980s, suggests O'Toole, "virtually everywhere in the profession, there was a subtle but steady retreat from the idea of physical permanence as archivists had come to understand it."⁵¹ It was apparent that archivists felt uncomfortable with the apparently limitless commitment that adherence to a notion of absolute permanence implied and they began to view questions of appraisal and preservation in much more relative terms.

The shift in thinking regarding the notion of permanent value may have been influenced by the development of the widespread acceptance that despite efforts at preventing deterioration and disintegration, records will naturally deteriorate. Archivists must accept the fact that because of the inherent physical characteristic of archival documents they will not survive permanently. Archivists and conservators continue to search for techniques to extend their preservation.

⁵¹ O'Toole, 21.

O'Toole's article suggests that the notion of permanence in archives has been closely linked to technological developments; the physical construction of various media used in document creation, and the archivists and conservators abilities to preserve the physical carrier have affected the notions of permanence. As Charles Dollar observed: "Our notion and understanding of the concept of the term permanence is rooted in information technologies."⁵²

At certain times over the years, archivists have been forced to make decisions regarding the preservation of the physical carrier, versus preservation of the information recorded on that carrier. The rise and practice of documentary publishing was regarded as a way of preserving the information contained in the documents. At the turn of the century advances in conservation techniques and practices led archivists to believe that permanent preservation was now possible.

With the proliferation of records created on new unstable media, primarily those recorded in a variety of electronic formats, the concept of permanence is currently being further challenged. All electronic media, including computer generated records, audio and visual records, are believed to have a limited life span. The challenge of preserving information recorded on unstable media has prompted archivists to question whether they should only be committing

⁵² Charles Dollar, *Archival Theory and Information Technologies: The Impact of Information Technologies on Archival Principles and Methods*. (Macerata: Publication of the University of Macerata, 1992), 65.

themselves to preservation of the information for a pre-determined period of time. Because the notion of permanence is unthinkable in the context of electronic records, archivists are being forced to reexamine and become more selective in what they acquire and reappraisal is suggested as one way of dealing with the problem. Given the threat of technological obsolescence represented by the media, traditional appraisal methodologies devised for paper records will not apply to electronic records. Archivists will not be able to wait until a reasonable period of time has passed in order to make informed appraisal decisions. Dollar suggests that appraisal must occur at the creation stage in order to identify records of "continuing value" with the implication that these records may lose value because of a declining need over time.⁵³ This suggests that appraisal must be conducted at various stages during the life cycle of the records, until a sufficient amount of time has passed to make a final appraisal knowing the full context of creation and use of the records.

David Bearman also challenges the concept of permanent value of archives arguing that the notion of permanence is skewed given the fragility of all media and that it should be replaced with more realistic terms such as "continuing value." He further suggests that archives should adopt policies based on the premise that no preservation measures be taken to extend the

⁵³ Dollar, 66.

“format life” of the material.⁵⁴ In other words, information recorded on a medium with a known short life span would have a predetermined retention period, based on the physical properties of the media.

O'Toole and Bearman argue that the concept of permanence as an absolute and infinite retention period is no longer practical due to changes in the way records are created and stored by contemporary society. While there is no question that contemporary records pose difficult problems for archivists, we must be careful not to overlook the fact that it is the information recorded on the media that must be preserved.

The increase in the volume of records generated by society and its ensuing problems have forced archivists to look for solutions to this problem. Modern appraisal theories and practices emerged out of the archivist's need to cope with the growing mass of records. Recent North American appraisal theory has been shaped by the appraisal methodology developed by Theodore Schellenberg whose appraisal strategy was based on the assessment of two values; evidential and informational value. Leonard Rapport however argues that the application of these criteria in appraisal decisions has resulted in the acquisition of too many records have been acquired on the basis of these criteria. He suggests in his article “No Grandfather

⁵⁴ David Bearman, Archival Methods, Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report, 3, no. 1, (spring 1989): 21.

Clause” that archives have acquired many records of limited value, because of their over-emphasis on selection on the basis of evidential value, and that these records would probably never be looked at by anybody.⁵⁵

The costs associated with the acquisition of archival material have often been given lip service in literature concerning appraisal. Despite the mounting concern over the costs of preservation, there have been few detailed analyses of the real costs of acquiring, processing, storing and serving archival documents.⁵⁶ Cost is mentioned as one factor to consider when making a decision about whether to acquire a particular fonds, and how much of that fonds will be selected and archivists are urged to consider the costs of processing, the cost of supplies, conservation treatment and the provision of shelf space. Increasingly though, it is being heralded as an even more important appraisal consideration. The abundance of modern documentation, the introduction of media requiring complicated and costly storage measures and dwindling financial resources may be forcing archivists to be more judicious in what they acquire. Recognizing the long-term costs associated with the acquisition, preservation and

⁵⁵ Rapport, 147.

⁵⁶ Bearman, 10.

provision of access to material in their holdings, archivists have extended this to argue that the costs of having archival material in custody is justified as long as the material is being used.

What is evident in Rapport's argument, and many other advocates of reappraisal, is that value should be determined by the use of the records. Maynard Brichford has commented: "The surest proof of sound records appraisal lies in the quality of the use of the archives and the growth of its reputation. Although the archivist must serve a broad administrative academic and public clientele, his final accountability for appraisal will be independent scholarship" and that "successful appraisal is directly related to the archivist's primary role as a representative of the research community."⁵⁷ The prevailing attitude among many of the advocates for reappraisal and deaccessioning, is that the documents that have been least used are prime candidates for deaccessioning.

The argument regarding the justification for the retention of archival material on the basis of use was articulated in the debate at the United States National Archives in the 1940's between G. Philip Bauer and Herman Khan. At that time, Philip Bauer presented the argument that in every case, the appraiser should ask whether the public benefit to be derived from saving public records is sufficient to offset the necessary expenditure of public money. Herman Khan on the

⁵⁷ Maynard Brichford, Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977)

other hand argued against this so-called utilitarian approach arguing that “we keep records not because it is a profitable investment, but because it is our innate assumption that civilized men can do nothing less...keeping records is primarily an act of faith. We keep records because of our deep emotional and intellectual commitment to the values of the civilization of which we are a part, and to what our ancestors did and to what we hope our children will do.”⁵⁸

Philip Bauer and Herman Khan’s debate reflects the differences in opinion regarding the fundamental nature of archives and the role and purpose archives play in society. As reflected in the literature concerning reappraisal and deaccessioning, and in recent appraisal literature, the issue regarding why archives exist and who the archives serves remains unresolved.

The question remains however, do archives have permanent value? The arguments reflected in the literature concerning reappraisal and deaccessioning suggest that they do not. However, these arguments reflect a pragmatic and practical approach to problems that are associated with the costs of retaining archival documents and do not take into account the larger questions of the role and purpose of archives in society.

⁵⁸ cited in Rapport, p. 143.

In her discussions about appraisal and value, Luciana Duranti has suggested that because value is a relative term, permanent value is, in many ways, an oxymoron. She argues, however, that the term permanent value still holds credence. This originates from a societal belief that each system has a strong sense of permanence - none believes in its own end and it works to perpetuate itself... each society selects the records it needs to document administrative and legal rights to documents proving political rights, and showing the evolution of thoughts and beliefs that gave origin, justification and support to the socio-political structure.”⁵⁹ It appears that recent appraisal theories, and by extension, arguments for reappraisal are not based on this belief with decisions are made based on the predicted or actual use the documents will receive. The archival function is no longer to preserve the evidence of social actions and interactions, and to make that selection on the basis of what that society needs to preserve. Instead, it is to preserve the records of society that are believed to be “useful” now and at a later date. The archivist then becomes the servant of current users of archives and attempts to respond to their changing research needs.

⁵⁹ Luciana Duranti, “So? What Else is New? The Ideology of Appraisal Yesterday and Today,” in Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice: Proceedings of the Joint Meeting of the Association of British Columbia Archivists and the Northwest Archives Association. Vancouver, April 26-28. ed. Christopher Hives, 10.

While this was the prevailing attitude for many years, recent archival literature suggests that these attitudes may be changing. There has been a recognition that archives must serve a broader purpose. As Terry Eastwood put it: "Society generates archives in the natural course of its activities as evidence of the play of relations between and among juridical and physical persons. That evidence is used for the conduct of affairs or to generate understanding of those affairs. In either case, people use archives to assist them to conduct their affairs by allowing them to reconstruct the facts of actions and conjure from them the course of past events. To facilitate either task, the value of archives as evidence must be protected."⁶⁰

What appears to have occurred in appraisal debates, and is reflected in the arguments for reappraisal is that, in archivists' attempts to select the best records for preservation, the actual and perceived needs of users have taken precedence. This has resulted in two sometimes opposing views of archives—archives as evidence and archives as informational resources, or, as Terry Eastwood has summarized, appraisal based on provenance, versus appraisal based on pertinence. We are in a period where appraisal on the basis of pertinence has held a strong hold on the archival profession and has influenced all archival activities including appraisal. Archives have been most closely allied with the historical scholarship and many archival

⁶⁰Eastwood, "Towards a Social Theory of Appraisal", 75.

practices including appraisal have been tailored to meet the needs of this select group. Because of the changing nature of historical research trends and interests it is not surprising that the records selected to meet the real or perceived needs of one generation of scholars will not be the records that serve those of current scholars.

The interest in reappraisal and the justification for it, has been embodied in the debate about the usefulness of the records. This idea that records are selected, and later re-evaluated on the basis of their historical usefulness must be challenged. As Sir Hilary Jenkinson astutely pointed out, "Can we even answer for it that in the future the historian will be the person most interested in the archives we are leaving behind us?"⁶¹ In reference to questionable appraisal decisions made in the past, Jenkinson also pointed out that we are not on this account to blame overmuch the judgement of earlier periods; the truth is simply that they were unable to predict the directions which would be taken by the historical interests of the next 100 years; and it is difficult to see how anyone can in conscience propose it in our own time to do any better for the interests of the future."⁶²

⁶¹ Jenkinson, 125.

⁶² Jenkinson, 139.

Our concept of the function and role of archival institutions and archivists changes over the years. These changes often reflect changes in research trends and users of archives. Because of these changes does it mean that holdings should be periodically re-evaluated and those records deemed not useful by current standards be discarded?

The purpose of the archivist and the social role of the archival institutions is to preserve the integrity of archival documents as faithful and trustworthy evidence of the actions from which they originated. It is precisely the value of the documents as established before they come to the archives which the archivist is entrusted to protect. It is a general value which all documents possess. It pertains to no single purpose for which they may be used but equally to all purposes.⁶³

This is not to suggest that we let all previous appraisal decisions pass without evaluation or assessment. As Eastwood points out:

We need to analyse the experience of what we have kept, but first of course, we ought to know why we keep anything, for that is the first criterion of our evaluating experience. For that reason, appraisal ought to involve a positive judgement of usefulness and importance, so we can see how well we have predicted. This evaluative method does not mean that we are free to invalidate previous decisions. Even if the results appear faulty to a later age,

⁶³ Eastwood, "Nailing a Little Jelly to the Wall," 237.

each age must be allowed its predictions.⁶⁴

There may be some truth in the argument that we might have acquired material of questionable value because the person appraising the material was not sure about the process. Appraisal remains an "inexact science" there are no rules and regulations, few guidelines and many variables involved in appraising archival material. As most North American archivists receive very little formal training in archival theory, particularly with regard to appraisal, most have learned to appraise "on the job".

How can archivists say with certainty that appraisal conducted at an earlier time was faulty? We may believe that by our own standards records which were selected at an earlier date are not those we might select today. It is fair to say that our value judgements of fifty years ago are no longer the standard by which we appraise material today. Value is a relative concept defined by the ideology of the day and what we value necessarily changes over time. Therefore, we cannot say with certainty that documents selected on the basis of what was considered sound judgement in the past is erroneous.

⁶⁴ Eastwood, "Towards a Social Theory of Appraisal," 84.

The archivist has a responsibility to society to select the records that he/she must preserve in order to facilitate the ongoing functioning of that society. What is selected for long term preservation reveals to later societies what social, cultural and ideological values that society valued. Because these values have changed over time, it is inevitable that current and future societies will question appraisal decisions that were made. Does this mean that they were wrong? In the words of Sir Hilary Jenkinson: "we can criticize the past only if it failed to keep up to its own standards of value."⁶⁵

Appraisal conducted on the basis of pertinence necessarily emphasizes use. If archives are perceived as repositories which acquire and provide access to information contained in the documents, appraisal will be conducted with this in mind. Because the use of material and research needs change over time, it becomes almost necessary to periodically reevaluate the usefulness of your holdings.

If we accept the theory that archives exist to preserve the evidence of human actions and interactions and that this evidence is selected based on the socio-political trends of that time,

⁶⁵ Sir Hilary Jenkinson, Manual of Archive Administration, 2nd ed. (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co., 1965): 145.

then we must also accept that the documents selected are the evidence of those social and political sentiments, and must be protected. By doing so, archives serve a wide range of users and their needs; some known at the time the selection occurred, many unknown. Archives should not be selected solely on the basis of their real or anticipated uses. Furthermore, appraisal decisions that are subject to review and validation at a later date, violate the fundamental purpose of archives as evidence.

In conclusion, systematic and widespread reappraisal is not a philosophically justified archival activity. Archives are created as a result of natural and necessary activities and there is a vital need by society to acquire and preserve some of these records. Therefore, permanent value still applies to selected records created by society. Widespread and systematic reappraisal therefore can not be justified. There may, however, be isolated circumstances where reappraisal is a valid and justified activity. The following chapter will examine some of the specific arguments put forth for reappraisal in order to determine when it may be acceptable.

Chapter 3

Is Circumstantial Reappraisal Justified?

The previous chapter concluded that reappraisal as a regular and systematic archival activity cannot be justified. However, are there are isolated cases where reappraisal may be valid and necessary? Are the circumstances discussed in chapter one cases of reappraisal, or do they constitute deferred appraisal, phased appraisal, or deaccessioning? This chapter will identify and discuss the circumstances where reappraisal has been suggested as a valid and necessary activity. By doing so, it will be possible to determine whether the action in question is a case of reappraisal and identify conditions where reappraisal is necessary and justified.

Acquisition policy not enforced

Although there are few documented cases, material may have been accepted with the expectation that additional, often better, material would be offered to the archives by the same

donor. While few archivists will admit to this practice, there is an implicit understanding that if the donor were given special treatment and made to feel that all of their archives were important, the likelihood of receiving more valuable material in the future would increase. There is a long-held assumption that refusal to accept all that was offered might insult or offend the donor thereby jeopardizing chances of receiving additional material.

Archival fonds are sometimes accepted because of political pressures. If the potential donor is an influential person in the community who with the potential to contribute to the organization through fundraising or some other measure of support, there is a greater likelihood that that person's documents will be accepted. There may be a reluctance to offend someone who may be able to assist you in some way in the future.

Archivists are often pressured into accepting and keeping material as a result of political and social considerations and persuasion on the part of the donor, trustees, academics, and/or society has forced many archives to accept documents because of the importance perceived by the public or because of their perceived intrinsic value. As Sheila Powell illustrates in her case study of the transfer of the Department of Immigration case files, social and political pressures can have a significant impact on the volume of records of questionable value that archives are

sometimes forced to accept, particularly when the pressure is coming from the main funding agencies.⁶⁶

These may constitute practical realities for some archivists, particularly in repositories that rely on the goodwill of donors for acquisitions. However, as the literature suggests, it is the archivist's responsibility to be persuasive and encouraging while being clear about institutional priorities and purposes and what the archives can be expected to provide. Otherwise the archivist will have to deal with irrelevant and unwanted collections at a later date. It is the archivist's responsibility to have clearly defined acquisition policies and appraisal guidelines and to be clear and consistent in the application of these and to convey this to prospective donors and creators.

Acquisition policy has changed

A number of archivists have argued that reappraisal is considered necessary when the institution's acquisition policy was revised and material acquired in the past no longer reflects the acquisition policy. Acquisition policies are shaped by the institution's mandate, its goals and

⁶⁶ Powell, 105.

objectives and its defined group of users. According to the Canadian Council of Archives'

"Guidelines for Developing an Acquisition Policy":

The acquisition policy is the instrument which provides the institution with the direction for making appraisal and acquisition decisions and allocating resources. It is the backbone around which the archival institution can acquire comprehensive holdings in a planned, coordinated, and systematic manner. It delineates the parameters of what archival records the institution is permitted to acquire or required to preserve and becomes the foundation for the development of more detailed acquisition plans and strategies.⁶⁷

The CCA Guidelines further point out that the acquisition policy should also give the institution the authority to dispose of those records which are no longer considered to have permanent value to the institution.

Acquisition policies are reviewed on a periodic basis to ensure that they accurately reflect the changing needs and requirements of the sponsoring body, the archives, its donors and users.

⁶⁷ Canadian Council of Archives. "Guidelines for Developing and Acquisition Policy," 1988.

When this occurs, there may well be material that no longer meets the criteria outlined in the acquisition policy. If this is the case, the institution may be obliged to remove all material that no longer reflects the collecting focus of their institution. The process of identifying this material does not constitute reappraisal. In most cases, the decision to remove the material results in a determination that the material no longer meets the geographic or subject focus of the institution, or that they are no longer legally obliged to preserve the records. There is no re-assessment of the archival value of the material.

As Susan Kooyman of the Glenbow Museum argued, reappraisal may be considered necessary when the material was acquired when there was no institutional acquisition policy. The experience at the Glenbow Museum presented a case where the archives had been collecting material without an acquisition policy for many years with the end result being a mixed collection that sometimes had little relevance to the geographic and economic area and the collecting focus that had evolved and refined over the years. The case of the Glenbow is not unique, and reflects the "hoarding" mentality that was evident in both archives and museums until quite recently.

The absence of a collections policy in the early years of the institution implied that a proper appraisal had never been conducted. The evaluation of holdings to determine their archival

value involved what might have been a first-time assessment about whether the material met the criteria outlined in the current acquisitions policy. What occurred at the Glenbow constituted a “deferred appraisal “ rather than reappraisal. In this case the material should be appraised according to the current appraisal criteria.

Reappraisal is required to correct “flawed appraisal”

Some advocates of reappraisal claim that one of its benefits is that it can be used to correct flawed appraisal decisions. While many opinions suggested “flawed appraisal” has occurred, few of these writers however provide any insight as to how to identify cases of “flawed appraisal”. Faulty appraisal is deemed to occur when the appraisal was conducted without sufficient knowledge of the creation, the context, and the use the documents originally received. This often occurred when an archival fonds was acquired over a period of time, or as regular scheduled transfers of accruals to a fonds or series already held by the archives. Under these conditions archivists do not always have the necessary information required to conduct a sound appraisal. Furthermore, documents received in a later acquisition may change the appraisal context and the archivist may realize in retrospect that the wrong records had been selected. The passage of time and receipt of additional material may bring new factors to light affecting decisions made in the past.

In the majority of cases, archivists believe that faulty appraisal also occurs when the person conducting the initial appraisal did not know how to appraise. This accusation may hold a certain amount of truth, is difficult to prove, and ultimately, remains a subjective judgement on the part of the archivist making this assessment at a later date. Until recently archivists did not have access to formal education and had to rely on on-the-job training to learn how to appraise records. Many have argued that appraisal remains an "inexact science" and an intuitive exercise. If this is the case, then faulty appraisal will continue to exist.

Since appraisal is generally a theoretical, subjective exercise, despite the lack of education or guidelines available to archivists involved in making appraisal decisions, it would be wrong to assume that there were no appraisal judgements made that were not questionable. How much or often can we assume that previous appraisal judgements were incorrect and what right do we have to correct those decisions? Caution must be exercised to avoid replacing one subjective judgement for another. Reappraisal should not be conducted in order to correct perceived "faulty appraisal" decisions.

Material lacks archival value

Maynard Brichford, Leonard Rapport and Sean McMnamin argue that archival documents should be subject to periodic review and assessment based on current appraisal standards --that if the material would not be accepted if offered today, there is no reason to continue to retain it.

Throughout the reappraisal literature, the concept of value has been closely linked with the amount of use that the documents receive. This is clearly reflected in the idea that archival documents are valuable only as long as they are being used and is rooted in the misconception that archives are about subjects, not as evidence of human actions and transactions. Because the concept of value is relative and is tied to the social and political opinions and beliefs of the time, archival documents would necessarily have a limited life span in an archives. This approach would mean that archives are constantly being evaluated according to transitory criteria and violates the fundamental nature and purpose of archives and is therefore not a valid and justifiable reason for reappraisal.

A better example has been offered to the institution

Leonard Rapport suggested that documents should be subject to reappraisal when a better example of a fonds has been offered to the institution. The argument that archives should consider reappraising and deaccessioning fonds if they are offered a better example of documents pertaining to a person, function or event may seem tempting. This argument

reflects the notion of appraisal based on pertinence and suggests that an archival fonds is a set of documents about a particular subject. Archives are not about things. They represent a natural and necessary creation of documents resulting from the functions and activities of an individual, organization or activity. The fact that related records exist in the collection may have a bearing on whether documents offered to a repository are acquired, however, the unique nature of archival fonds, and the fact that they exist as evidence of their creator's activities and functions makes reappraisal on this basis unjustifiable.

A similar argument has been made for reappraisal and deaccessioning of documents or series within the fonds if the information contained in the documents is duplicated elsewhere.

Because of the nature of archival material, it is not likely that entire fonds will be duplicated.

Often, however, copies of documents appear in more than one fonds. Despite the fact that the document or documents in question may appear in another fonds, it is important to consider the context in which the documents were created, accumulated and used. Their relationship to other documents in the fonds may make their meaning considerably different from the same documents elsewhere.

Space

A number of the case studies reviewed in this thesis revealed that reappraisal is considered a necessary solution to space shortages. This "crisis management" solution undermines the notion of permanence and may lead to the perception that archives are disposable. The ability to provide proper care, including adequate storage space which meets temperature and humidity control standards is a consideration when appraising material. In the past, decisions to reappraise archives have been prompted by a shortage of space and little prospect of acquiring further space. Faced with this dilemma, archivists considered it an appropriate time to clean out some of their collections using questionable criteria such as it should never have been acquired in the first place or the amount of use it has received.

While some of the decisions reached in conducting this exercise may be archivally sound; for instance, deaccessioning material that never, or no longer meets the institution's acquisition policy, or appraising fonds that have never been appraised, it should be carried out carefully, not as a crisis management measure.

Preservation Concerns

Sometimes, it is argued that reappraisal is necessary when the archives is no longer able to preserve the documents properly. This usually arises out of a legitimate conservation and/or storage problem and is one that is becoming more prevalent as archivists are forced to deal with more complex and fragile media. Either the document or documents have deteriorated to

the point where they are no longer usable or they require expensive conservation treatment before they can be viewed. In these cases, the archival value of material is rarely brought into question. It is simply a matter of not being able to use the material. The decision to remove material from the custody of the archives is a straightforward deaccessioning procedure.

No Initial Appraisal

Another argument put forth for reappraisal is that the material was never appraised when it was accepted. It sometimes occurs that material is legally accessioned into archival custody, processed and made available to users without ever having been appraised. However, unless it has been clearly documented that this occurred, it may be difficult to establish whether or not the material was appraised, or if the processing archivist had decided that the entire fonds was worth retention. Documenting appraisal decisions and actions is a relatively new procedure in many archives and until it is done consistently, it will not be possible to be certain that this in fact occurred.

When it is certain that the material has never been appraised, the material should be appraised based on current standards and values. Because no previous evaluative judgements have been

made regarding the records, this evaluation constitutes a deferred appraisal, rather than reappraisal.

Amount of use does not warrant retention

Perhaps the most contentious argument for reappraisal is the one based on the use the documents receive. In many of the arguments for reappraisal, the concept of value is closely linked to the amount of use that the material receives. Proponents of reappraisal based on use argue that the cost of long term retention of records should be dependent upon the amount of use they receive and that records that receive little use do not warrant long-term preservation. The question of use is one of the underlying themes of Rapport's arguments favouring reappraisal, and one that is supported by a number of archivists including Maynard Brichford who argues that archivists are "keepers for a purpose and that purpose is not "keeping" but using."⁶⁸

Should the value of archives be determined strictly on the basis of use? First of all, it is important to consider the possible distinction between the frequency and quality of use.

⁶⁸ Maynard Brichford, "Seven Sinful Thoughts," American Archivist 43 (winter 1980), 14.

Secondly, archives are filled with material that may not have a high research value, but must be kept for ongoing administrative, legal or other purposes.

Before making any decisions about reappraisal on the basis of use, it might be useful for archivists to consider why the material has not been used. As Karen Benedict pointed out, poor access, poor description and the lack of awareness of the existence of the material on the part of the staff are obvious factors affecting use. Is it important to make a distinction between the frequency versus the quality of use? Should use be a consideration at all? Finally, and most importantly, how can use be measured? Archivists have been criticized on a number of occasions for failing to adequately know who its users are, what materials they use and how they locate that material.

Retention Review

Reappraisal has been suggested as a necessary part of retention review. Re-evaluation of records retention schedules is an ongoing necessary part of archival work. Retention schedules are fluid; the appraisal decisions change as new record series are created and legal, financial and administrative requirements change. In time, the legal, financial and administrative values may expire. This is no different from the acknowledgment that over time, our concept of values

change thereby altering appraisal decisions. However, changes in retention schedules--such as a decision to no longer retain a particular series of records because changes in legislation mean that there is no longer a legal reason for records to be accepted -- are regular occurrences.

In a sense, retention review is a form of reappraisal; it is a reassessment of values ascribed to a particular series of records. However, the difference lies in the fact that the records in question are not in archival custody, or the evaluation of the records schedules addresses the records at hand -- in the records centres or in the offices and not yet in archival custody. Because what has been acquired in the past is a reflection of the values of that society, then they must remain in archival custody.

In their definition of reappraisal, the Bellardos consider retention review as a reappraisal function. I would argue however, that it is in fact an appraisal function rather than a reappraisal function and that the decisions made to retain a particular record series at one time and a further decision to discontinue the receipt of that same records series at a later date, does not require the deaccessioning of the records acquired at an earlier date.

The majority of arguments put forth for reappraisal and deaccessioning are not justifiable in terms of archival theory and practice. Reappraisal should not be conducted to correct so-called flawed appraisal decisions made in the past or as a means to acquire additional space. Several of the proposed cases may be valid, but they do not constitute reappraisal.

For instance, material that can no longer be kept by an archives for preservation reasons, material that does not fall within the institution's acquisition mandate, do not involve evaluation of the archival value may be deaccessioned without going through the process of reappraisal. If it is possible to determine that a particular fonds has never been appraised, a deferred appraisal rather than reappraisal occurs.

In conclusion, there are few cases where reappraisal and deaccessioning are warranted. While it should not be carried out on a systematic basis it may be necessary on a case by case basis.

chapter 4

A Procedure for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning

As the previous chapters have outlined, systematic reappraisal is not a valid and justified archival activity. However, it is sometimes warranted and necessary on a case by case basis. When it is required, it is important that very precise and restrictive policies and procedures be in place to guide the activity and its subsequent outcome, deaccessioning. This chapter will outline procedures for reappraisal and deaccessioning and discuss the administrative, legal and ethical considerations concerning each.

In their analysis and report on reappraisal and deaccessioning, the National Archives of Canada clearly distinguished between the two functions and outlined procedures for each.⁶⁹ Part of the

⁶⁹ National Archives of Canada, Acquisition Evaluation Study, vol III, 160.

purpose of delineating these separate phases was to assign responsibility for various actions in the reappraisal and deaccessioning procedures and to provide guidelines regarding estimates of time required to carry out these actions in order to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the merits of reappraisal and deaccessioning. These phases outlined by the National Archives can form the basis of procedures for reappraisal and deaccessioning that may be applied to many archives.

Reappraisal Cycle

The reappraisal cycle was broken down into four separate phases; the identification phase, the decision phase, the reappraisal phase and the concluding phase. During the identification phase potential holdings are targeted for consideration for reappraisal. At this time, the following activities may occur: review amended schedules; review finding aids; consider initiatives by other divisions; review initiatives from other staff members or researchers who indicate problems with a collection such as unreasonable restrictions. This identification should occur on a random rather than systematic basis.

During the decision phase, decisions are made about whether it is worthwhile to reappraise a collection. Considerations such as the size of a fonds or collection, its arrangement, whether

the technical formats are obsolete or are difficult to read are reviewed in order to determine whether it is feasible and worth the effort and cost to reappraise the holdings. This should not be conducted in isolation and should include consultation with other archivists.

During the reappraisal phase the assessment of the archival value occurs. This should be conducted in light of new or additional information. This procedure may involve extensive research and consultation to obtain and verify the new information.

The concluding phase is where the possible results of reappraisal are identified and a decision is made to retain all or part of the fonds. The activities that occur during this phase include preparation of justification for the reappraisal recommendations, consultation with other archivists and in some cases, the creator of the documents, approval of that decision, arrangements to reorganize the collection sometime in the future. Arrangements must be made to amend or revise finding aids sometime in the future in order to better reflect the collection. If a positive decision is made to remove the material, continue on to the deaccession cycle.

Deaccessioning cycle

Deaccessioning may be considered a possible outcome of reappraisal. There are isolated cases where deaccessioning may occur without the material having been reappraised. For instance, if the material is out of the scope of the acquisition or collections policy, if the material is damaged or is no longer readable, if it is lost, or if it is a repatriation request. The deaccessioning cycle is also divided into four phases; the decision phase; the notification phase; the approval phase and the concluding phase.

During the decision phase of the deaccessioning cycle, consideration is given to how the material will be disposed. Disposal options include: destruction of the material, return of material to the donor or creator, transferal of the material to another repository, trade or sale of the material. These are all evaluated in order to arrive at a consensus as to the most appropriate outcome to select.

The next phase, the notification phase is where preliminary investigation as to the feasibility of implementing decisions made regarding the disposal of the material occurs. At this time, all original negotiations, contracts and other legal documents are reviewed in order to determine what the institution's responsibilities are with respect to the material. If necessary, this might require legal consultation in order to ensure that contracts are not violated. Archivists must consider the terms of the original agreement made between the donor and the institution.

Violation of these terms would require dissolution of the contract and would be subject to legal review. Finally, appropriate departments, individuals, or other institutions or agencies are contacted regarding the decision.

In the approval phase, completion of necessary documents and forms and the preparation of written reports tracing the evolution of the decision the rationale for that decision should occur.

The final part of this phase includes the receipt of the forms signed by various authorities indicating approval or disapproval of the various decisions.

The final phase, the concluding phase, is where the decisions relating to the deaccessioning cycle are executed including the chosen method of disposal. Once the decision has been made to deaccession material, all reference to the deaccessioned material must be amended and/or revised in finding aids and accession files. The institution may also choose to inform their sponsors and users of the decision to deaccession material and provide justification for their actions. This is particularly useful if the material has been transferred to another repository.⁷⁰

⁷⁰The practice of deaccessioning has occurred regularly in museums since the 1970's. Two interesting case studies describing controversial deaccessioning decisions and public reaction to those decisions may be found in Stephen Weil's "Deaccessioning practices in American Museums," Museum News (February 1987) and in Elaine Tomlatch's "A Case Study: The Deaccessioning Controversy at the New Brunswick Museum," Muse (summer 1990). Both describe cases where deaccessioning was justified within the framework of the

Permanent removal of material from archives may have damaging effects on the institution.

The museum community has encountered numerous public relations problems, legal cases, and has raised questions regarding the credibility of a number of institutions as a result of deaccessioning artifacts and paintings from their collections. There may be a high price to pay in terms of public opinion and whether the actions of the institution are considered ethical.

There is a deep-rooted belief among the public that archives and museums acquire material in the public trust and that certain practices, such as destruction or sale of that material violates this trust. Some institutions rely solely on donations for the development of their collections and there may be difficulty among donors and the general public understanding that something that once had value and was so gratefully accepted could later be considered worthless.

Archivists may be becoming more aware of the potential problems associated with reappraisal and deaccessioning. Gerald Ham, for instance, recommends that archives should have "safeguards" to protect the institution, its staff and its archival program. He suggests that policies should include provisions and procedures for future deaccessioning of material and require written reappraisal reports and that these policies and procedures should be approved

institution's policies and procedures, however, public outcry resulted in public relations problems and changes in institutional policy.

by the highest authority.⁷¹ This however should be the normal course for archives as the proper, legal and justifiable means for general accountability, not as a means of covering up poor decisions.

One of the most contentious issues regarding reappraisal and deaccessioning concerns the methods of disposal. The options that are available to archives include transfer to another institution, return to donor, sale to another institution or dealer, or destruction. Perhaps the most contentious issue concerning deaccessioning procedures is the sale of material from the holdings; particularly if the material had been donated. There have not been any reported cases of the sale of deaccessioned material from archives, suggesting that it has not yet posed a serious problem for archives in the way that it has for museums and art galleries whose objects and artworks may command a high market value and who may be under pressure to sell parts of their collection to raise revenue for the institution.

Nevertheless, there are some archivists who consider that the sale of material from archives should be a consideration. Lawrence Dowler believes that archivists, while acknowledging obligations to donors and the legal limitations of disposal, should buy, trade, sell and dispose

⁷¹ Ham, 92.

of material in an effort to refine, or simply change the focus of their collection. The sale of collections should be considered a legitimate method of achieving this end. Like his colleagues in the museum community, he suggests that people look more favourably upon the selling of deaccessioned material when the proceeds from the sale of the material were used for additional acquisitions rather than operating costs.⁷² Dowler further asserts that the sale of deaccessioned archival documents is an integral part of "collection development" and that profits achieved by this means will enable the institution to purchase better collections and provide resources for their preservation. He warns "if archivists do not have the courage to act, others perhaps less principled, or at least, not so well informed will very likely make the decisions for them."⁷³ While Dowler may believe that the sale of deaccessioned documents may represent fiscally responsible behavior, it is often perceived by donors, creators and the general public as a violation of the notion that archives act in the public trust and that the material they acquire, often through donation, may be acquired for its potential market value.

Reappraisal and deaccessioning may present certain legal problems to archivists. Archivists should be aware of and honour the original agreements that were signed when the material was acquired by the archives. While it is not a good practice for one party to abrogate a contract

⁷² Dowler, 123.

⁷³ Dowler, 117.

unilaterally, if a decision has been deemed necessary to deaccession the material, it may be justified in breaking this contract. Depending upon the complexity and terms of the original agreement, the archives may be required to consult with lawyers in order to break the contract. Alternately, it might be determined at this stage that it might be too costly or difficult to proceed with reappraisal.

There has been some question regarding the legality of deaccessioning documents for which an archives with charitable status has previously issued a tax receipt. According to Revenue Canada, a gift (donation) is defined as a voluntary transfer of property without expectation of consideration (benefit) received in return. The three elements which must be met in order to qualify the donation as a "gift" are: 1) it must be voluntary, 2) it must be tangible property, and 3) there must be no consideration, or expectation of consideration in return. If an individual makes a gift of property to a charity, the implication is that the charity has full discretion over the subsequent use of the property. If the institution chooses to transfer the material to another repository, or decides to destroy it, the tax receipt issued to the donor would not be affected in any way.

If the institution accepts a "gift" then chooses to return it to the donor, this could be viewed as applying some of its resources to private and non-charitable ends and is not permitted under the

Income Tax Act. A registered charity that is revoked loses its ability to issue tax receipts and is subject to a revocation tax. The charity could however sell the property back to the donor at fair market value without jeopardizing its charitable status. The donor could then donate the gift to another charity and receive official receipt for the fair market value of the gift at the time the gift is made.

A further option is that the archives may agree to give the property to a charity of the donor's choice. This would be consistent with the donor's original intent to make a charitable gift and it would not jeopardize the charity's status. The donor's previous charitable credits would be unaffected and the charity would credit the value of the gift against its annual expenditure obligations.⁷⁴

As the National Archives study emphasizes, the administration of reappraisal and deaccessioning activities and implementing the decisions requires a substantial amount of time of the staff of the institution.⁷⁵ Other related activities such as informing donors and users,

⁷⁴Jan Strike, Charities Division, Revenue Canada to the author, 3 March 1994.

⁷⁵National Archives of Canada, National Acquisition Evaluation Study, vol. III, 182.

negotiating with other archives, amending finding aids, dealing with the public, require management, coordination and time. The administrative costs of these activities may be high and in some cases, the costs of conducting reappraisal and deaccessioning may be far greater than the perceived or actual benefits to the institution.

The debate regarding whether the institution is under any obligation to inform the donor or creator of their decision, or to include them in the decision making process has not been resolved in either the museum or the archival community. The Canadian archival community has taken a stand on this issue by including in the ACA Code of Ethics a clause concerning deaccessioning where it is suggested that archivists should inform the donor's of their decision to deaccession the material. This may be difficult if the donor is no longer at the address given in the original contract, or impossible if the donor cannot be located.

The question of whether users should be informed, or in fact, included in the decision making process has also not been resolved. The participants in the National Archives study held strong opinions about the donor's rights and extended these to the rights of the users as well, suggesting that they too should have some say and consideration in the decision to deaccession

documents.⁷⁶ Under its act, the National Archives must submit proposals for deaccessioning to the National Archives Advisory Board which includes the perspective of both archivists and user groups. Not all hold this opinion however. American museum curator and authority on legal issues concerning museums and other cultural institutions, Marie Malaro informed a session at the 86th Annual Meeting of the American Association of Museums⁷⁷ that once the material in question has been legally transferred to the museum, whether through sale, transfer or donation, the museum is under no obligation to consider the donor's wishes. The museum is under no obligation to inform the donor, and certainly under no obligation to consider the donor's opinion on the matter. This argument would also hold true for archives.

While archivists and archives serve the citizens, users and the public who may never directly consult the documents, it should remain their professional decision to make determinations regarding the archival value of material. Archivists should be aware of the use of documents. However, to include the users and public in decision-making or approval process would undermine the objectivity of the appraisal process. Any efforts to include users in this process, on a consultative basis, would prove to be a costly and time-consuming measure.

⁷⁶ National Archives of Canada, National Acquisition Evaluation Study, vol I, 37.

⁷⁷ Marie C Malaro, Deaccessioning: the Role and Responsibility of a Public Trust, (sound recording). 86th Annual meeting of the American Association of Museums. Elkridge, Md.: Chesapeake Audio/Video Communications, (1982).

Methods of Disposal

Selecting the most appropriate method of disposal largely depends upon the reasons why the material is being deaccessioned. If the material is deemed to no longer reflect the institution's acquisition policy, consideration may have been given during some stage of the process to identify another repository that would be interested in acquiring it. While transfer to another institution may appear to be one way to satisfy donors and users, it may present significant measurable and unmeasurable costs to the institution. For instance, it may be difficult and time consuming to identify a new home for material that no longer fits the acquisition policy. It may require time in negotiating with the other institution, incur legal costs, and the cost of transferring the material to its new location. If the material is deemed to have no archival value, destruction, or return to the original donor are possible options.

Decisions to deaccession material and the procedure by which it is carried out can have an impact on the credibility of the organization. Recent episodes in museums and art galleries throughout North America attest to the fact that it is still very much a contentious issue.

Surprisingly, in the discussions about the need for reappraisal as a collections management tool and cost saving measure, few have addressed the issue of the cost of conducting reappraisal and deaccessioning. The National Archives study illustrates that depending upon the size of the fonds or collection, the complexity of the records, and existing agreements, reappraisal and deaccessioning may require substantial resources in terms of the staff time, time required by outside consultants, and other archivists. They concluded that the variables that exist among reappraisal cases and the unmeasured costs associated with reappraisal and deaccessioning, made it difficult to determine the actual costs.⁷⁸ Archivists must consider these costs when looking at reappraisal and deaccessioning as a cost-saving exercise and that the costs associated with conducting systematic reappraisal might not warrant these activities.

Archivists are faced with many choices while conducting reappraisal and deaccessioning. As outlined in this chapter the various steps that must be taken to carry out this exercise are often time consuming and pose many ethical, legal and administrative problems which must be considered throughout the process. Archives must have policies and procedures in place to guide them in making decisions about, and conducting reappraisal and deaccessioning. These policies should include statements regarding when reappraisal and deaccessioning should be conducted and outline the criteria used in each case. They should outline the procedures by

⁷⁸National Archives of Canada, Acquisition Evaluation Study, vol III, 182.

which reappraisal and deaccessioning decisions are approved, and identify who authorizes these decisions. They should also state the approved methods of disposal and procedures for how these are carried out. Such policies will guide archivists in making decisions regarding reappraisal and deaccessioning, ensure consistency in when it should be considered and how they are applied. By doing so, it will provide greater accountability for the institution.

Conclusion

This thesis attempts to define the terms and discuss the practice of reappraisal and deaccessioning. A review of the current literature identifies the opinions about reappraisal and deaccessioning and reviews cases where these activities are alleged to have occurred. The literature review revealed that reappraisal and deaccessioning was practiced by many archivists and that a number of archivists support the proposal put forth by Leonard Rapport in his 1984 article "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records" that reappraisal and deaccessioning should be carried out on a regular and systematic basis.

Reappraisal is an appraisal issue. It raises the question of whether or not archives possess permanent value. It has been suggested, reappraisal is to be conducted on a regular systematic basis, and material deaccessioned on the basis of how much use it receives, whether they are perceived to have value according to current standards, if better examples of material pertaining to the same subject matter exist in the archives. If this is the case, then the concept of archives having permanent value no longer applies. However, this idea goes against the

fundamental nature and purpose of archives. Archives are created in the natural course of actions and reflect human actions and interactions. They are acquired and preserved as evidence of those actions and interactions and are appraised according to the standards of the day and must be protected as such. The issue of how much use archives receive or perceived duplication should not enter into decisions about whether to keep or deaccession material from archives.

Reappraisal has been suggested as a way of correcting flawed appraisal decisions made in the past. Concepts of value applied during the appraisal process are historically relative and ideologically determined. It is therefore wrong for archivists today to second guess appraisal decisions made by previous generations. Reappraisal is not a valid and justified activity in these cases.

An examination of reappraisal case studies also revealed that circumstances that were presented as reappraisal activities were, in effect, cases of phased appraisal, deferred appraisal, or outright deaccessioing. For instance, if it can be determined that the material was never appraised initially, a deferred appraisal is conducted rather than reappraisal occurs.

Reappraisal and deaccessioning should not be conducted as a cost-saving measure to secure more space or to generate revenue through the sale of archival documents, whether the profits are used to enable the purchase of other collections or for the general operating costs of the institution. Once again, this violates the notion that archives possess permanent value.

There are few cases where reappraisal is necessary and warranted on a case by case basis. For instance, reappraisal may be necessary when material was acquired and appraised without sufficient information, or in cases where changes in legislation have occurred. It is apparent from the literature that archival documents were accepted into archival custody and appraised without knowing the full context or when an insufficient amount of time has passed. This might have occurred either through omission of information, or when acquiring the records of an open fonds and dealing with on-going accruals from the same creator. In these cases, reappraisal may be a necessary way of reviewing previous appraisal decisions and making more informed appraisal decisions. Because this practice will not likely change, phased appraisal should be explored as an alternative. Phased appraisal may also assist archivists address the problem of records created on unstable formats where it cannot be immediately determined whether or not the information recorded in those media have permanent value. Archivists could benefit from reviewing the rationale and procedures outlined in the Grigg Report to establish their own procedures for conducting a phased appraisal.

Deaccessioning is the necessary outcome of reappraisal and it may present legal, administrative and ethical ramifications that are potentially sensitive and costly. The archives may not be in a position to legally deaccession material in its possession, either as a result of a question of ownership, and because of agreements made when the material was first donated. Reappraisal and deaccessioning have a number of measurable and unmeasurable costs associated with it. The reevaluation of documents requires staff time, decisions regarding reappraisal and deaccessioning must be consultative and they must be verified and documented.

The ethical costs associated with deaccessioning are also high and present potential public relations problems. The act of deaccessioning material from an institution that acquires material in the public trust may appear to be a violation of the role and purpose of archives in society. Both donors and users may be displeased with the reappraisal decision and the methods of disposal. Thus, archivists should avoid these situations by making well-informed judicious appraisal decisions, implementing their institutional acquisition policy, and documenting appraisal decisions.

Reappraisal is often initiated as a result of poor initial appraisal decisions. The best remedy might be found in better appraisal practices and by implementing very precise and restrictive policies for reappraisal and deaccessioning.

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