

The CHA maintains a watchful eye on issues of concern to historians working in Canada. Since the last *Bulletin*, letters were sent to the following two institutions. The full content of the letters, in both English and French, can be found on the website. Any member who has identified a potential advocacy issue is welcome to contact the President, Mary Lynn Stewart, to discuss.

## I Staff Cuts at the Glenbow

In early January 2010, the president wrote to protest the recent decision taken by the Glenbow Alberta-Institute to implement staff cuts. These cuts appear to have fallen disproportionately on the Archives division, which has seen the number of archivists it employs fall from six to three.

From the letter:

A reduction of fifty per cent would be serious enough, but its effects are even more alarming than the number alone suggests: the duties of one of the three remaining archivists are devoted solely to the Imperial Oil collection while those of another are split with the administration of the Library and Archives. This leaves the Archives with just one staff member whose time is devoted to the entire collection. The Glenbow's first archivist, Hugh Dempsey, was an active member of our organization, editing an archives column for the CHA's newsletter.

While we recognize that the present economic downturn poses challenges to a number of organizations in the heritage sector, we believe the reductions in staffing constitute a serious threat to the ability of the archives to function properly and compromise our abilities as historians to gain access to archival materials.

As Canada's largest non-governmental archival repository, the Glenbow's extensive holdings of documents and photographs relating to the history of Western Canada are unparalleled. Generations of graduate students and faculty members from universities across the country and around the world have availed themselves of the expertise of its archivists and relied on its collections. Much of this work has fundamentally shaped our understanding of the region and the nation.

We believe the reduction in the number of archivists will erode the Institute's ability to "exercise curatorial care of and provide public access to the collection assets" as the Glenbow Alberta-Institute Act requires (section 2.3c). Large volumes of material will have to be stored until they can be processed, and hence they will be unavailable for consultation. Documents in storage may well be at risk of deterioration. None of this is consistent with the Institute's stated values and beliefs or its management goals: "to refine and build the collection and maximize accessibility,

while improving condition, utility and security."

In addition, with fewer archivists, it is unclear how the Institute will continue to identify, assess, and acquire new materials relevant to the history of the Canadian west. Without an active acquisitions programme, the Institute's reputation for excellence – the Glenbow "brand" – is in danger of being tarnished, and even more serious, irreplaceable collections of documents and photographs – the heritage of Albertans and Canadians – may be lost to the province and country forever.

We urge you and the Board of Governors to reconsider the decision to implement such drastic staffing cuts to the Archives and to develop creative solutions consistent with the objects of the Institute, "to promote and encourage the acquisition and diffusion of knowledge of the human race, its arts, its history, and the nature of the world in which it lives."

## II LAC and Canadian Historians: A Comment on New Directions for Library and Archives Canada From The Canadian Historical Association

The Canadian Historical Association has always maintained a keen interest in the policies and practices of Library and Archives Canada (and its two predecessors, the National Archives of Canada and the National Library of Canada). In recent years, it has been acutely aware of new strategic directions at LAC, and has tried to voice the concerns of its members about the implications of those changes. The current re-thinking underway within LAC's senior administration makes us deeply uneasy.

- Canada's full documentary heritage must remain a priority for LAC.
- The full range of services must be maintained at LAC to facilitate historical research and thus support education of all kinds.
- Dialogue between LAC and its client groups must continue in the Service Advisory Board.

### The Brief History of a Fruitful Dialogue

Communication between LAC and the CHA has been unusually intense over the past two and a half years. In August 2007 the CHA was abruptly informed that LAC intended to slash hours of service at 395 Wellington St. We wrote repeatedly to senior LAC administrators asking that those changes be rolled back and that public consultations over services be initiated. We were conveying the anger expressed in a deluge of letters from individual historians and graduate students, resolutions of whole history departments, and communications from many other organizations whose members used LAC's research facilities. In October we joined representatives of nine of those groups (genealogists,

librarians, professional writers, community historians, aboriginal researchers, francophone scholars, public historians, architectural historians, and graduate students) in a meeting with Ian Wilson and his senior staff to convey our collective concern. Out of those weeks of protest and meetings came two important concessions from the LAC administration – a commitment to reconsider the hours of service and the creation of a permanent Services Advisory Board (SAB).

The SAB met for the first time in late November 2007, and it was clear to participants in its deliberations that LAC was taking the board seriously. The membership was large and broadly representative of LAC's diverse clientele, and it quickly became a forum of bluntly frank input from those groups. Many LAC staff attended, explained LAC policies, asked for advice, and generally listened carefully and respectfully. For two years, then, service at 395 Wellington St underwent some important improvements, including a re-adjustment of the hours of operation. During 2008 SAB members also contributed to the development of a paper on the future of LAC's services branch.

From the CHA's perspective, that process was seriously disrupted with the shake-up at the top of the LAC hierarchy last spring. The SAB has met only twice since then (once by conference call only), and the official faces at the table changed. The work that SAB members had done to sensitize LAC staff to its clients' needs seemed to have been forgotten.

Membership on the SAB was for two years, and in November 2009 the terms of the only CHA members on the board expired. No new appointments have been announced. Our direct input to service provisions at LAC has thus come to an end. Indeed, the future of the SAB was left in the realm of uncertainty at the end of that meeting.

The CHA strongly believes that this worthwhile experiment in public consultation should be kept alive and used regularly to discuss ongoing issues in LAC's development.

### **The Winds of Digital "Modernization"**

At its meeting in November 2009, the SAB was presented with a set of strategic-planning documents under the rubric "Modernization at LAC." It was not entirely clear to participants in that discussion what was old-fashioned (or pre-modern) about the institution's operations. But it was abundantly clear that LAC's new top priority will be digital records.

Back in the debates over hours of service in the fall of 2007, the CHA's concerns were regularly countered by the claim that LAC's mandate required that more resources be shifted into digitization of records, in preference to support for on-site consultation of paper records ("analogue" records in LAC's current parlance). Repeatedly we were told that this was a process of "democratization" that would make records available to Canadians across the country, not just those who could get to Ottawa, and to a wider range of Canadians, including elderly genealogists and young high-school students. We were reminded

of the success of LAC programs that appealed to such constituencies. Implicit in these arguments was the hint that other historical researchers were a tiny, dwindling elite that no longer deserved the resources allocated to their work.

We responded, in part, that historians are not by nature elitists, but they are generally life-long professional researchers. Individually their use of institutions like LAC are vastly more intensive and more long-term than a student completing a class assignment or a citizen seeking an ancestor's date of arrival in the country. Historians are engaged in a process of mediation between a country's documentary heritage and its citizens, interpreting the past through careful scholarly engagement, reflection, and communication. A great many others interested in historical subjects – including genealogists, teachers, students, popular writers, journalists, novelists, and film-makers – rely on historians' scholarly production. Through various media (such as the acclaimed *Canada: A People's History*), they help to tell stories to Canadians about their past. Through their own teaching, historians also pass on the distilled essence of their scholarship to new generations of Canadian citizens. Within and outside universities, professors and graduate students are deeply committed to public education. Teaching depends on research, and research depends on full access and supportive services in libraries and archival institutions like LAC.

We also responded with the practical argument that we are ready to marshal again: making records available to wider audiences on the internet is a welcome initiative with great potential for extending the participation in historical discovery – like other researchers, historians have been delighted to find census, military, shipping, and other records available on-line - but we do not consider that the digitization program substitutes in any significant way for on-site service. Only a small fraction of the LAC's vast holdings, including finding aids, has been digitized to date and serious researchers will continue to need to consult the detailed finding aids and documentary collections at LAC on site. Even if all projected digitization projects scheduled over the next several years were to be carried out, most serious researchers would still need to travel to Ottawa in order to identify the collections they needed to research, and then carry out research in these collections on site. And many large, important collections will never be transferred to electronic form. A good website will remain not a portal to the whole collection, but largely a useful tool for planning a research trip in order to actually open books or boxes in the reading room.

It appears, however, that those arguments, repeated many times by members from all client groups in the SAB over the past two years, have been ignored. In fact, LAC's vision of digitization has now vastly expanded. According to Terry Cook's recent memorandum, the new Librarian and Archivist of Canada, Daniel Caron, wants LAC "to emphasize being a digital library in terms of its acquisitions and in terms of its services."

It is appropriate that LAC should devise new strategies for collecting those records which are now "born digital," preserving

them for future research. However, in the rush to create a “digital-centric institution,” LAC must not displace the necessary resources required to allow true access to centuries of records that are not digital and never will be.

### **A Sacred Trust**

We are deeply concerned that this approach to LAC’s mandate shows no appreciation of the nature of historical research in this country or the responsibility of the country’s leading library and archives for the process of historical preservation. In the tradition of national archives around the world, to which LAC and its predecessor institutions have always adhered, *all* records of national significance should be gathered in such a major repository for possible use by future generations. A move away from the diversity of our documentary heritage violates that well-established tradition.

CHA members, like hundreds and hundreds of other historical researchers, engage with a huge variety of records generated by diverse populations and agencies in Canada. Until the close of the twentieth century, those records were almost always kept in paper form. Some had been transferred to microfilm, but most were in files in boxes or on printed pages of publications. The documentary heritage also had aural and visual dimensions – audio and video tapes, films, photographs, and other documentary art. LAC houses a large part of that diverse record, but a good deal still remains outside any archival repository and often in danger of permanent destruction. LAC’s proposed new strategic direction would seem to leave that huge body of records in limbo and at risk.

The new talk is about “partnerships” as an alternative. Presumably other institutions should take the paper and other items while LAC stores the electronic material. At a time when archival institutions and libraries across the country are facing funding crises and serious questions about their future, LAC is apparently abandoning its responsibility to provide a leadership role in the preservation of the full historical record. This is no time to off-load historical record-keeping. It is also worrisome to contemplate any privatization of record-keeping in this process, since issues of access, user fees, and public accountability more generally inevitably arise.

The CHA believes that the proposed shift in priorities is a serious violation of LAC’s legislated mandate. It cannot decide to pull back from responsibility for the largest and most important parts of the documentary heritage of Canada. Indeed, this would amount to a serious breach of its legislated responsibility to be “a source of enduring knowledge.”

We urge LAC to pull back and rethink its current strategic direction.

### **What Do Historians Want from LAC?**

Not surprisingly, Canadian historians want LAC to facilitate their research and thus their educational work. In an era of budget constraints, they would hope that senior administrators would attempt to convey to the government what would be needed to make that possible and to make a strong case for adequate government support for what is demonstrably Canada’s most important cultural institution. They can point to LAC’s move into the digital world as a successful, necessary expansion of services – a new initiative that needs its own additional funding. In any budget trimming or re-prioritizing, historians would insist that LAC must sustain the following:

- A continuing commitment to collection of all parts of Canada’s documentary heritage, regardless of the form in which it was generated.
- The tools to access that material, including effective on-line finding aids that can enable them to plan their research.
- Adequate on-site services for retrieving and consulting material in the LAC collection.
- Adequate staffing to provide competent, professional advice about material in the collection, including that of LAC’s professional archivists.
- In any new “partnerships,” the maintenance of the principles of public accessibility and accountability that have always governed LAC’s operations, particularly free service.
- The opportunity to participate in on-going discussions about the future of LAC and the preservation of Canada’s documentary heritage through the Services Advisory Board.

The CHA and its individual members care deeply about Library and Archives Canada, are prepared to help make a strong case publicly for more resources to enable it to continue to fulfill its mandate, and look forward to renewed dialogue on the many questions facing its future.