

Library and Archives Canada Under Siege

Michael Peterman critiques federal funding cuts that jeopardize Canadians' documentary heritage and access to the historical record.

IN THE FALL OF 2000, the National Library of Canada and the National Archives invited Beth Hopkins, Carl Ballstadt and me to advise on the creation of a website based on their three Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill collections. The result was the launch the following year of the Moodie-Traill website (www.nlc-bnc.ca/moodie-traill/index-e.html).

Writing in the *National Library Bulletin* (July-August 2002), I described how we were able to integrate some 200 personal letters with other archival materials into a readily accessible website. This was a stimulating collaborative process for us, working closely with library staff and technological experts. The result was all that we had hoped for—an attractive site that opened up important archival material of literary and cultural importance to interested students and researchers. The website let viewers both access the selected material and realize how much more was available in the collections of the National Library and Archives for further research.

At about the same time I was able to work with Michel Brisebois, then the National Library's rare book curator, when he had the opportunity to purchase a very rare book, *Patriotic Songs* (London, 1830), the collaboration of Susanna Strickland (not yet married) and her older sister Agnes. My colleagues and I were greatly excited that the National Library had been able to add to its collection a book that we had not been able to locate in any library in the Western world. What a find, and what a valuable addition!

These two personal experiences must stand for many more. Beginning in the late 1970s, we as researchers benefited greatly from our working contacts with many dedicated staff members, librarians and archivists at both the National Library and the National Archives (now Library

and Archives Canada, or LAC). I have long been impressed by, and grateful for, the high level of service, knowledge and commitment of LAC's archival staff.

But now things are very different. Under Daniel Caron, the new Librarian and Archivist of Canada (who, alas, is neither a librarian nor an archivist), and the Hon. James Moore, MP, Minister of Canadian Heritage, major changes in operation and service are being implemented in ways that make little sense to those who value and make use of archival sources and rare books of national significance. The implications are staggering for the country, our history, and for what we as Canadians can learn about ourselves.

It is a cause for deep concern that, in taking strong steps to balance the budget, the current federal government is making large cuts in the funding of an institution of major cultural and historical consequence. In the name of a one-size-fits-all approach to financial responsibility, the current federal government imposed a 20 percent budget cut at LAC in 2013, affecting staffing across the board. This follows several cuts in recent years. I have learned as well that LAC has placed a virtual freeze on the acquisition of new collections and material, presumably because there is not enough staff or money to negotiate for them and to access them (the freeze does not, however, affect government and military documents). This in itself is a horrific decision. The obligation to accept and house a copy of any book or pamphlet published in Canada, which has long been an accepted role of the National Library, as it has been for the Library of Congress and other so-called depository libraries, has also been discontinued.

In the library's reading room, a vital centre for researchers from across Canada and around the world, reference hours have been significantly



Pedraic Ryan photo

reduced. I remember being able to work long into the night in the 1980s while reading through important archival material on a tight working schedule. Such is no longer possible. It now takes much longer to access material on site in Ottawa, and the follow-up on such requests can be frustrating. Imagine hearing from an archivist that the document you desperately need has apparently been lost because of inadequate filing. Gone as well is the country's inter-library loan service, a vital program that made rare books and documents available to researchers and citizens across this vast country. As a seasoned user I ask, how responsible are such actions? How insensitive this is to the needs of researchers who often come long distances to work at LAC!

Think of it this way: The federal government is spending more than \$30 million to promote the view that Canada won the War of 1812, and the right to say "I am Canadian," while allowing everyday operations at LAC to founder and in some cases disappear—restricting access to the very materials that help us understand our identity as Canadians.

The answer to all of LAC's current woes, we are told, is the creation of a totally digitized archival collection. But if we ask how much of the current collection has been digitized to this point (notwithstanding such earlier efforts as described above), the answer is less than 10 percent. If we ask how quickly this time-consuming work can be done, we are bound to be disappointed. And how accessible will it be? The comprehensive digitization and indexing of Canada's archival documents will take decades.

Such are the consequences of treating libraries and archives as lesser, or less important, institutions. Be assured that it happens everywhere in this country when budgetary decisions trump vision and good sense—in universities, schools,

hospitals and governments. More than ever in Canada, especially at our National Archives, we need a vision that recognizes how important book preservation and documentary collection is to our past and future. These are the invaluable treasures of our national past.

The National Archives has a durable four-point mission on behalf of the country—to collect, to preserve, to provide access, and to show leadership. Janet Friskney, president of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, has pointed out that Library and Archives Canada is failing on all four points. Writing to James Moore, Friskney put the matter of such changes succinctly: "Canadian taxpayers pay for LAC, and therefore deserve to be assured that its mandate is being upheld by upper management currently in place at LAC."

Friskney's criticism has the support of a number of Conservative MPs who have called for redress and adjustment. Minister Moore, however, seems unwilling to see the problem for what it is. As he recently told the CBC, his pet project is the creation of a new Museum of History for the country. Yet somehow he manages to ignore the disturbing truth that the very repository of our history's lifeblood is under siege during his watch. Imagine what \$30 million might have meant if it had been put into the preservation and accessing of the records of our real history.

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