

Private Holdings: Assessing the McGill University Archives' Role

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Tradition of Private Collecting

In 1962 F. Cyril James declared that the newly founded McGill University Archives (MUA), while concentrating on the institutional records of McGill, had the mandate to acquire private papers of former faculty members. He stated that “material of this nature may not perhaps be classed as University archives, but it would certainly enrich our records.” By 1966 the narrow focus on faculty papers had been enlarged to include records of societies connected to the University. By the 1970’s the acquisition program was further enhanced to include McGill related material from all sources, in particular the papers of staff and alumni. In the 1990’s lack of storage space led the MUA to draw back on the scope of their program and focus on faculty papers. In 2004 the new terms of reference on private acquisitions included records of the wider McGill community such as the archives of staff, faculty, and students, as either individuals or groups, as well as archival records to support historical research.

McGill University Archives long involvement in the acquisition of private papers is a trademark of Canadian archives activities. This tendency to acquire both institutional archival records regardless of format as well as related private papers in one repository reflects the Canadian tradition known as the “total archives” approach. The MUA is however not alone in the acquisition of private papers at McGill University. The McGill University Libraries also acquire private papers through units such as the Canadian Architecture Collection, the Rare Books Division of McLennan Library, and the Osler Library. All of these units are also currently members of GARM (Montréal Area Archivists Group). GARM’s mandate is to co-ordinate the acquisition of private papers in the Montreal area and all the members have selected specific collecting areas for private papers. The goal of GARM is to ensure that valuable archival records are not lost but do find a home in the appropriate repository. GARM members often provide advice to potential donors concerning the most relevant site for their archival deposit.

New Horizons in Private Collecting

The MUA has consistently acquired the private papers of University professors, staff, and students as well as the organizational records of related groups. The new element

emerging from the 2004 terms of reference is the move beyond the traditional acquisition of McGill related materials to encompass archives that support historical research. This new mandate allows MUA to cast a wider acquisition net but also imposes on the unit the requirement to do extensive liaison work with McGill faculty and students before, during and after the acquisition of new archival records to ensure they truly fit into the wider goal of supporting academic research and teaching at the University. This new mandate has required that the MUA re-assess its holdings to ensure that the acquisitions done in the past still meet current historical research needs of the University.

Looking Forward

The goal for the review of the MUA holdings is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the collection and to develop an acquisition plan with goals and objectives that will enable us to fulfill our mandate as ascribed by the terms of reference. A preliminary review of our holdings has revealed that core strengths of the current collection lie in the areas of faculty papers as exemplified through key fonds such as John William Dawson, John Humphrey and Abraham De Sola. The archival records of individual staff members are rare. The notable fonds include the archives of former University Archivists John Andreassen and Alan Ridge as well as University Librarian Charles Gould. The records of students are also quite meager; however there are exceptional fonds for Annie Pelletier, Eric Sprenger and Dorothy Ross. The archival records of staff, student and faculty organization are fairly well represented and include the records of the McGill University Non-Academic Staff Association, Student Society of McGill University, and the McGill Association of University Teachers. The preliminary results indicate strengths in the area of faculty papers, weaknesses in the areas of individual students and staff as well as strengths in the fonds of faculty, staff and student groups.

The acquisition of records to support historical research is the second part of the mandate. After excluding the faculty, staff and student fonds the remaining currently held archival records were evaluated in terms of the strengths and weaknesses as sources for historical research. This overview was based on a professional assessment of the content of the holdings chiefly relying on repository level finding aids. These are the major strengths of the collection; in the area of science; the fonds of 19th century geologists such as John William Dawson, George Mercer Dawson, Thomas Sterry Hunt, William Logan and Robert Bell, in the area of business; the fonds of James McGill, the Montreal Exchange and financier John Wilson McConnell, for family life; the fonds of the Dawson Harrington family and the Lyman-Scrimger family, for social and philanthropic

organizations; the fonds of local Montreal organizations such as Montreal Council of Social Agencies, St. James Literary Society and the Canadian Club, and for the subject of war and the military the fonds of the Canadian Officers Training Corps, War Records Office, Arthur William Currie, Andrew G.L. McNaughton, Albert Kelly, and T.D. Wallis.

Next Steps

- Systematic detailed review of holdings on a case-by-case basis to assess their ongoing value to support historical research at McGill University and the transfer, if possible, of those fonds no longer having research value to other repositories.
- Development of an acquisition plan based on realistic goals and objectives tied to the 2004 mandate and available resources.
- Develop closer co-operation amongst McGill repositories to facilitate the acquisition process.
- Develop common descriptive tools to disseminate McGill University holdings.
- Encourage all archival partners at McGill to participate in GARM's major review of acquisition zones in 2006.
- Assess the potential of the collections of the McGill University Archives for digitization.