

**“EVERY REQUISITE INFORMATION”:
CONTEXTUAL PROVENANCE IN THE RECORDS OF THE
COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE OF THE HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY, 1884-1910**

by

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A Thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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MASTER'S THESIS/PRACTICUM FINAL REPORT

Master's Thesis entitled:

**“Every Requisite Information”: Contextual Provenance in the Records of the
Commissioner's Office of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1884-1910**

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Master of Arts

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**“Every Requisite Information”: Contextual Provenance in the Records of the Commissioner’s
Office of the Hudson’s Bay Company, 1884-1910**

BY

Lisa Friesen

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree**

Of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis explores the societal, administrative and recordkeeping contexts which influenced the creation of the records of the Commissioner's Office of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1884-1910. The primary archival methodology in this study relates to the exploration of a record's context of creation, an approach which seeks to determine all facets of the provenance of the record.

Chapter one details the history of the principle of provenance and contextual theory in archival thought, tracing its formative origins in the nineteenth century down to the postmodern approaches of the 1990s. The chapter outlines the different aspects of contextual exploration, including societal, administrative, recordkeeping and custodial histories. Chapter two explores some aspects of the societal and administrative histories of the Commissioner's Office. The chapter sets the office within the context of Canadian business history of the late nineteenth century, as well as pointing to the HBC's roots in British colonialism. Chapter three looks at another aspect of contextual analysis, recordkeeping practices within the Commissioner's Office. Through the examination of various Commissioner's Office records, the study attempts to show how the societal and administrative contextualities have influenced the creation of the office's records. Finally, the conclusion demonstrates how contextual analysis can be applied to archival practice, in particular through the Archives of Manitoba redescription project (known as Keystone) for the holdings of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. Contextual analysis of records has proven to be a crucial tool in this project. Thus, archival theory asserts its practical place in the archives.

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Chapter One

The Emergence of the Contextual Approach in Archival Work

The contextual approach to archival work is, at its heart, a project of history. It asks the archivist to provide as much as possible of the context of the creation of a record and to apply this knowledge to all the functions an archivist performs. This knowledge of records drives archival appraisal, arrangement, description and reference service – to name but a few aspects of archival work. Tom Nesmith sums up the contextual approach as “the idea that archival documents can only be understood in context, or in relation to their origins and to other documents, not as self-contained, independent items, to be reorganized in archives along new subject, chronological, or geographical lines.”¹ This idea has its roots in the principle of provenance, which became archival dogma with the 1898 publication of the Dutch *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, and has remained the central tenet in archival work. The principle of provenance asserts that records can only be described and arranged as parts of a body of records emanating from the same record creator; furthermore, the principle states that the origin of records must be acknowledged.

While the basic idea of provenance has not changed significantly, current archival theory and practice encourages a greater level of self-consciousness by the archivist when working with records, in her awareness of the fluidity of meaning embedded in the records, in her awareness of the subjectivity she brings to the work, and thus in her awareness of her role in creating these meanings. As such, the exploration of the context

¹ Tom Nesmith, “Archival Studies in English-Speaking Canada and the North American Rediscovery of Provenance,” in Tom Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993): 2.

of creation of records is an act of historical research, done not solely for the purpose of historical scholarship, but rather to place documents in context for the purpose of performing the various archival functions for all users of archives.

This chapter will introduce the emergence of the contextual approach in archival work through the principle of provenance, developed in nineteenth-century Europe, and discuss its later adoption in Canadian archives. From there, the chapter will examine how archival theory regarding the context of creation is changing due to the influence of postmodernism in the 1990s. This overview of the history of the contextual approach to archival work will lay a foundation for examining the records of the Commissioner's Office of the Hudson's Bay Company at the turn of the twentieth century. It will explain how changes in archival theory have challenged archivists to view these and other records anew. It will explain how knowledge of the content of these records is not enough. To fully understand the records of the Commissioner's Office, the archivist must root them in the contexts in which they were created.

The records of the Commissioner's Office have been chosen for examination because of their significant position within the HBC's history. The Commissioner's Office records make up most of what is currently known as Section D in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives – a general heading for records created by the chief company administrative office in North America.² The records occupy approximately 80 feet of shelf space in 29 series. The records examined cover the period between 1884 and 1910, the years in which Commissioners Joseph Wrigley and C.C. Chipman were in office, although some records during Commissioner James A. Grahame's tenure from 1874 to

² Section D encompasses records kept prior to 1870 by the Governor of Rupert's Land as well as records kept after the dissolution of the Commissioner's Office in 1910.

1884 will also be looked at. In 1871, the Commissioner's Office was created as the London-based HBC's Canadian headquarters in Winnipeg, as a response to economic challenges posed by the company's loss of its long monopoly in the Canadian fur trade, and as a way to modernize the company's managerial system in the face of new technology and business systems. The creation of the Commissioner's Office reflects the HBC's adoption of new management systems which placed great emphasis on efficient record keeping and centralization of Canadian operations in Winnipeg. In 1910, the functions of the Commissioner's Office were decentralized into three distinct operational branches. The Commissioner's Office as it once was ceased to be and a new era of management began.

The aspects of context of the creation of the records of the Commissioner's Office that will be examined in this thesis will be the societal, administrative and recordkeeping contexts. Societal context is important as the broadest context in which records creation and archival work can be understood. It affects all other aspects of context. The conditions, values, ideas and aspirations of a society shape what people deem important to communicate, document and archive and how they do so. Societal conditions favour or support certain record makers, such as powerful institutions like the Hudson's Bay Company in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus the characteristics of such institutions – their administrative structure and related functions, for example – also ought to be presented and examined, as they too will shape what and how records are created, used and archived. This knowledge of institutions also helps archivists to assist researchers to locate records. Records of institutions also need to be examined. The ways in which records are managed by institutions, particularly in the recordkeeping systems

through which they are controlled, add a further layer of important context wherein records are labelled and connected to one another by the institution in order to foster certain ways of viewing and managing the objects of their makers' attention.

Although this chapter will outline additional aspects of context in order to explain more fully the contextual approach, it is not possible in a master's thesis on the voluminous Commissioner's Office records to explore all of these dimensions in depth, or even to discuss exhaustively the three aspects (the societal, administrative and recordkeeping contexts) it highlights. This thesis simply attempts to make a contribution to this task and to archival work with these records.

The contextual analysis provided here is influenced by postmodern insights. These insights suggest that acts of communication, such as contextualizing a body of records, shape rather than just reflect what we understand about the records and that human communication cannot provide a single definitive reality or truth. Thus the interpretation of context provided here is just that, an archivist's interpretation, which may shape how readers will view the records of the Commissioner's Office. Other interpretations will no doubt follow by other archivists and researchers. In this long-term process of contextualizing these records, they will likely be 'created' or understood in many ways. This thesis attempts to begin that process by examining some key aspects of the context in which these records were created.

The Dutch Manual

The birth of contextual archival theory occurred across the nineteenth century, and received a pivotal endorsement at about the same time that the Commissioner's

Office was overseeing Canadian operations for the Hudson's Bay Company. An early view of the contextual approach to archival work was given in the influential *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* published in 1898. The Dutch *Manual*, as it is popularly known, was written by Samuel Muller, Johan Feith and Robert Fruin, for the Dutch Association of Archivists and published with the support of the Dutch government and State Archives. It articulated two basic interrelated archival principles: provenance and respect for original order. These principles became the cornerstone for archival work and are still essential guideposts in archival administration.

The Dutch *Manual* arrived when the relationship between archives and the budding field of professional academic history was being cemented. The new professional historians were guided by the Enlightenment's redefinition of time. Time was no longer seen as running along a divine, predetermined path, explained and marked by biblical events running from Creation to Apocalypse. Instead, time was secular, epochs in history were devised by human authors, "and historians became those who could measure development by progress toward modern, Western time."³

The nineteenth-century archival perspective in Europe reflected the historical agenda of this new profession. Most professional historians of the time believed that absolute historical truth was accessible in primary texts; the way to reveal this objective truth was through rigorous archival research and seminar training. Explanatory history, as this method was known, was born in this milieu and "bequeathed a powerful analytical tool useful to all peoples trying to make sense of where they had been and what they were

³ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: Norton, 1994), 53.

becoming.”⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, the methodology and style of historical research and scholarship had been standardized through the seminar, inspired by German scholar Leopold von Ranke in the 1830s. Through the careful study of the physical evidence (archival documents), the seminar provided the laboratory-like setting that was needed to write scientific history.⁵ The seminar and archival research became the standard for historical methodology and writing. Historians were trained in textual analysis, and formed an elitist club bound together by the arduous pursuit of the authentic past.⁶

The professionalization of history and historians’ devotion to the written text as bearer of truth gave archivists a more scholarly role in the nineteenth century as they helped historians uncover the facts. Archivists now had a mandate to participate in scholarly pursuits. Special schools were created in order to train archivists. Archivists learned how to read and interpret old manuscripts and other sources through the application of paleography, philology, diplomatics, sigillography and heraldry. They also were taught the histories of the legal and administrative structures of the old regimes in order to properly interpret medieval documents.⁷ Thus archivists ceased to be mere bureaucrats and joined in historical scholarship themselves.

⁴ Ibid., 52.

⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁶ Bonnie G. Smith, “Gender and the Practices of Scientific History: The Seminar and Archival Research in the Nineteenth Century,” *American Historical Review* (October 1995): 1156. Smith sees the seminar and historical science as enmeshed with the development of nineteenth century masculinity. The language surrounding seminar study emphasized it as “manly work,” and republican and middle class in nature, meaning that, through hard work, the truth could be uncovered. To carry the metaphor further, and underscore the gendered nature of the new scientific history, and the place of archives within it, archives and documents were even feminized by some of these male historians as “princesses in need to be saved.”

⁷ Michel Duchein, “The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe,” *American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992): 17. Duchein considers the 1681 publication of the *De Re Diplomatica* as the birth of historical science as well as a breakthrough in archival theory. Written by the French Benedictine monk Dom Mabillon, the *De Re Diplomatica* outlined diplomatics as a methodical way to search for the characteristics a given individual record should have in order to be considered authentic. It

The increased access to public records combined with archivists' new-found prominence in historical study profoundly affected archival administration. The new archivist-historians began to debate the application of historical methods to their archival work. Their more clerical and bureaucratic predecessors had, especially in the eighteenth century, arranged and described records by subject. Classification systems were used, which "appealed to the mind of the Enlightenment era when everything had to be clearly defined and ordered in logical schedules."⁸ Thus the manner in which records had been created and filed in their offices of origin was lost. The evidential quality of the records for historical research or other purposes was thereby undermined. In a key step away from this approach, the French government proclaimed its commitment to the principle of provenance, or *respect des fonds*, in 1841. Through this new view, "all documents which come from a body, an establishment, a family, or an individual form a fonds, and must be kept together...."⁹ Although archivists since then have argued about how to define a fonds more precisely, the idea that the records of a given creator (or provenance) should always be identified as its records remained a guiding feature of their work. A corollary of this provenance idea, that the records of a given creator should be left in the original physical order in which they were filed by their creator (an idea that was not part of the 1841 French view of provenance) gained support in the mid-nineteenth century. This notion of "respect for original order," was espoused most prominently at the Royal Archives of Prussia in the 1880s. These developments paved the way for a significant shift in archival thought and work: the codification of the principle of provenance in the ideas of *respect*

proved to be particularly useful when analysing medieval documents. Through the application of diplomatics, archivists began to take a more active and scholarly role in records.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*

des fonds and original order in the 1898 *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*.

The first and foundational rule of the *Manual* defines archives as “the whole of the written documents, drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials....”¹⁰ Rules eight and sixteen lay out the concept of provenance and original order respectively. Rule eight states that archives created by one creator must not be mixed with the archives of another creator, nor categorized into artificial arrangements such as chronology, geography or subject. Rule sixteen states that original order must be kept – that arrangement “must be based on the original organization of the archival collection, which in the main corresponds to the organization of the administrative body that produced it.”¹¹

The Dutch *Manual* soon became the bible of European archival method. As a measure of its influence, it was translated in short order into many different languages. However, as Dutch archivist Eric Ketelaar points out today, “what had begun as one hundred principles with explanations, guiding a starting profession, hardened into unquestionable dogmas.”¹² The tendency in modern archives has been to depend heavily on such comprehensive, authoritative texts, as if they sum up all the rules and answers. This discourages the development of archival theory. Ketelaar questions this stodginess in drawing attention to the ideas of Theodoor Van Riemsdijk, a contemporary of Muller, Feith and Fruin. Like them, as early as the 1870s Van Riemsdijk concluded that documents should be placed in their natural and original context. Unlike Muller, Feith

¹⁰ Quoted in Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 21.

¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 21.

¹² Eric Ketelaar, “Archival Theory and the Dutch Manual,” *Archivaria* 41 (Spring 1996): 35.

and Fruin, however, he states that this complex context must be explored in historical research into the functions and record making processes of the records' creators. This departed from the *Manual*, which assumes that the fonds relates straightforwardly to the organization chart or administrative structure of the creating body. The *Manual* thus offers a practical standard to be readily applied, leaving little room for analysis of the variety and complexities of particular contexts of records creation. Van Riemsdijk's ideas were not widely adopted.¹³ Thus Dutch archivists, and indeed the international archival community, were diverted for some time from pursuing this broader approach to archival theory, one that would not resurface until the latter half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the Dutch *Manual* marked the beginning of an archival science which effectively governed archival administration until the mid-twentieth century.

Sir Hilary Jenkinson

British archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson wrote the first major treatise in English on archival theory and practice, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, in 1922.¹⁴ He was prompted to do so by the vast amount of documents produced during World War I and the challenge this posed to archives. Jenkinson's approach to archival work was in part a reaction against the historian-archivist model. He also espoused positivist notions regarding the place of archives in historiography. Jenkinson argued that as long as archivists do not intervene to select records for inclusion in archives or promote or do historical research with them into favoured topics, then archives are impartial evidence, the natural and untainted result of administrative acts. They are not created with posterity

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ There were also a number of influential Italian treatises written around the same time by archivists such as Eugenio Casanova and Elio Lodolini. Duchein 20; Cook 25-26.

in mind. Therefore, the role of the archivist is simply that of custodian who acts as “an unbiased ‘keeper’ of records and a ‘selfless devotee of Truth.’”¹⁵ There should be no involvement with the records on the part of the archivist that would taint the records’ impartiality. The historian has the responsibility to glean meaning and relevance from the archives, while the archivist has no role in such interpretive research.¹⁶

In regard to the selection of records for archives, Jenkinson thought it was the duty of the creator to do so. Terry Cook points out that this reflects the then common view, as laid out in the Dutch *Manual*, that archives have important organic qualities:

If archives were the organic emanation of documents from a record creator, then severing any record from that organic whole seemed to violate fundamental archival principles as established by the Dutch. If records were to maintain their innocence in an archival setting, then any appraisal by the archivist was utterly inappropriate.¹⁷

Like his Dutch and other European colleagues, Jenkinson supported *respect des fonds*. In applying it in the arrangement and description of records, he proposed the “archive group,” which encompassed all the records “from the work of an Administration which was an organic whole, complete in itself...”¹⁸ Thus Jenkinson advocated the creation of very large groups or fonds (as only the largest agencies of government could even come close to having such autonomy). But many constituent individual creators of records in these groups were swallowed up and their particular provenance obscured. Furthermore, Terry Cook points out that, in creating the archive group concept, Jenkinson had closed series and dead creators in mind – quite appropriate for European archives facing mountains of medieval and early modern records. What the archives group

¹⁵ Cook, “Past is Prologue,” 25.

¹⁶ Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co. Ltd., 1922; revised ed., 1937).

¹⁷ Cook, “Past is Prologue,” 23.

¹⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 24.

concept does not address is what to do with the open-ended or ongoing series of records often created by modern organizations and how their administration might challenge the archive group concept.¹⁹

Like the Dutch, Hilary Jenkinson envisioned a conservative employment of provenance in archival work. His conservatism is perhaps most evident in his view that one key way to protect the integrity of records is to allow records creators rather than archivists to select records deemed archival. Jenkinson failed to acknowledge the serious limitations of this approach. For one thing, allowing records creators to select records means they may destroy important records. Cook provides an apt example:

Jenkinson's approach to appraisal and, indeed, to the very definition of archives would (no doubt to his horror) give sanction to record creators such as U.S. Presidents Richard Nixon or George Bush to destroy or remove from public scrutiny any records containing unfavourable evidence of their actions while in office, thus undermining both democratic accountability and historical knowledge. At its most extreme, Jenkinson's approach would allow the archival legacy to be perverted by administrative whim or state ideology, as in the former Soviet Union, where provenance was undermined by the establishment of one state fonds and archival records attained value solely by the degree to which they reflected the "official" view of history.²⁰

Jenkinson had a vision for archival administration that, from today's perspective, conceives the archivist's role narrowly and places too much trust in records creators. However, with the Dutch and other Europeans, he was successful in strengthening the place of provenance at the forefront of archival work.

¹⁹ Ibid., 24-25.

²⁰ Ibid., 24.

Early Canadian Archives

While the concept of provenance became important in European archives at the turn of the twentieth century, Canadian archives were slow to put it into practice. Until the mid-twentieth century, arrangement and description were done primarily by subject, chronology and geography. As Nesmith states, “the Canadian archival tradition took shape around the idea that archivists acquired and organized archives largely in accordance with the subject interests of academic historians.”²¹

From the 1870s to the 1930s, Canada’s first two national archivists – Douglas Brymner and Sir Arthur Doughty – made the Canadian government’s Archives indispensable to the emerging Canadian historical profession and thus played a vital role in the development of Canadian historiography. Doughty, in particular, thought that history based on actual archival records could help subdue the old tensions between English- and French-speaking Canadians in a new unifying nationalism for the young Dominion. In 1872, the Archives Branch, a forerunner of the current Library and Archives Canada, was created within the Department of Agriculture. Douglas Brymner was appointed “Senior Second Class Clerk” in charge of the archives.²² The main task of the archives became the promotion of nationalism and cultural unity. This was accomplished by focussing on acquisition of colonial era personal and government records, many still in private hands, rather than on post-Confederation federal

²¹ Nesmith, “Rediscovery of Provenance,” 4.

²² Ian Wilson, “A Noble Dream’: The Origins of the Public Archives of Canada,” *Archivaria* 15 (Winter 1982-1983): 18.

governmental records. In fact, the archives did not have jurisdiction over federal records, since they were the responsibility of the Department of the Secretary of State.²³

The archival principles taking shape in Europe at the time appear to have had little affect on the Canadian scene. Arthur Doughty resisted the use of provenance in arrangement until 1926.²⁴ Doughty, like his contemporary Jenkinson, also led the archives down a decidedly positivist path. Doughty saw the archives as a place where objective and definitive knowledge of the facts would create a unified Canadian historiography, and thus solve the problem of multiple interpretations of Canadian history.²⁵ The value of archival records, therefore, lay purely in their informational value. This view was evident in Brymner's and Doughty's arrangement and acquisition practices. Arrangement by subject, chronology and geography meant original order was lost, along with any contextual information that could be gleaned from it. Moreover, the overseas collection and copying programs, based on Brymner's or Doughty's vision for Canadian historiography, meant that isolated records were acquired rather than whole sets of records from one creator.²⁶

Theodore R. Schellenberg and the Contextual Approach in American Archives

American archivists, like their Canadian counterparts, paid little heed to European contextual archival thinking until the mid-twentieth century. Except for a small group of

²³ Danielle Lacasse and Antonio LeChasseur, *The National Archives of Canada, 1872-1997*, Historical Booklet No. 58 (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1997), 4.

²⁴ Doughty was likely introduced to European archival principles by David W. Parker, chief of the Manuscript Division of the Public Archives of Canada from 1912 to 1923. But Parker's endorsement of provenance and *respect des fonds* was largely ignored throughout his tenure at the archives. See Carman V. Carroll, "David W. Parker: the 'Father' of Archival Arrangement at the Public Archives of Canada," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 150-154.

²⁵ Lacasse and LeChasseur, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

archivists in the few government records archives at the state level, most managed their records without regard to provenance. They focussed more on understanding the information content of the records and arranging and describing them in light of that knowledge. After the establishment of the US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in 1934, archivists there began to explore and espouse European approaches in a series of influential articles and books. The most notable statements arising from this broad effort were by Theodore R. Schellenberg in his *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* and *The Management of Archives*. They became the new manuals for mid-twentieth century archival concerns in the United States and many other countries.²⁷

Although Schellenberg endorsed provenance, he questioned how it had been applied by Jenkinson and other Europeans. Schellenberg thought that the immense volume of modern archives created by the expanding interventionist state meant that European notions required revision. Jenkinson's archives group concept was unworkable because few modern administrative units are so completely independent of other departments. And even if they were, the amount of records in such an agency's group would be so enormous as to be beyond practical management, which would mean its provenance could not be adequately understood. Schellenberg argued that the archives group concept "is applicable only to dead records – past accumulations to which no more records will be added or records of dead agencies."²⁸ He and his NARA colleagues proposed the record group instead, which, while maintaining the identity of the provenance of records, grouped them in a great many more smaller bodies, in part in

²⁷ T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), and *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965).

²⁸ Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 181.

order to apportion archival work more manageably among NARA staff. Schellenberg and NARA also departed from Jenkinson in maintaining that the archivist, not the administrative creator of the records, should select them for archival retention. Only the archivist understood their long-term historical research value.

Although Schellenberg's work represents a stronger American commitment to the contextual approach, that commitment remained limited in key areas. It was mainly applied to arrangement and description of records in record groups, but not to all media of record. Photographs and maps were left out. It did not have much of a role in appraisal, where subject specialist knowledge was stressed as the basis for determining whether records were archival. Some, such as Australian Peter Scott, criticized the limitations of the application of provenance in the record group. He thought that individual recordkeeping systems (or series), not a 'grouping' of such systems, even if the members of the record group are related by provenance, was a better focus of the application of provenance. And while the NARA/Schellenberg approach was influential in Canada, and led to the first significant Canadian commitment to provenance in the 1950s, Canadians did not apply it critically or even systematically. Knowledge of the information content of records remained the major component of archival expertise in Canada.²⁹

The Rebirth of the Contextual Approach

The limitations of the conception and application of the contextual approach in Europe and North America became increasingly obvious by the late twentieth century due to the growing volume, variety, and complexity of records and types of archival

²⁹ Nesmith, "Rediscovery of Provenance," Cook, "Past is Prologue," 26-27, 38-39; Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Altona, Man.: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1986), 53.

research. These trends exerted rising pressure to adopt a more thoroughgoing contextual approach as the intellectual basis of archival appraisal, arrangement, description and reference service. These changes in records and researchers meant that archivists could no longer know in depth about the information contents of the records and the subject interests of researchers, or even anticipate the latter very well. In the 1980s and 1990s, archivists in several countries responded by calling for greater reliance on contextual knowledge. In Canada, Hugh Taylor, Tom Nesmith, and Terry Cook, among others, advocated that archivists reach deeper into what Nesmith termed the “history of archival records.”³⁰ To do this, Cook called on archivists to use their backgrounds in historical methodology to “move from an ‘information’ to a ‘knowledge’ paradigm” through contextual work.³¹ They argued for more attention to the societal context in which records have been created, administrative histories of institutions, biographical studies of individual records creators, the history of recordkeeping processes and systems, and of the characteristics of particular media and important types of individual records.³²

A common feature of this new contextual thinking is that it focussed almost entirely on the context of the records’ initial inscription and filing, and seldom on its subsequent history. The influence of postmodern ideas on archival thinking in the early 1990s began to change that significantly. Postmodern ideas greatly expanded the concept of context. Beginning in the 1960s, methods of interpreting texts were called into question by emerging critical frameworks with roots in Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s ideas. Postmodernists and poststructuralists have since attempted “to challenge

³⁰ Nesmith, “Rediscovery of Provenance,” 14.

³¹ Cook, “Past is Prologue,” 36.

³² See Nesmith, “Rediscovery of Provenance” and Terry Cook, “From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-1985).

convictions about the objectivity of knowledge and the stability of language” and “to ‘deconstruct’ ... the notion of the individual as an autonomous, self-conscious agent.”³³

The postmodern questioning of the ability of communication to convey a single definitive reality cast doubt on historical truth and objectivity, as well as the linearity of time.

Communications (or records) can be viewed across their entire histories in an open-ended variety of contexts, not just an ‘original’ context. Terry Eagleton explains:

It is difficult to know what a sign ‘originally’ means, what its ‘original’ context was: we simply encounter it in many different situations, and although it must maintain a certain consistency across those situations in order to be an identifiable sign at all, because its context is always different it is never *absolutely* the same, never quite identical with itself.³⁴

Jacques Derrida explored and exposed these meanings with deconstructive methods of reading, which pried into the gaps in the connection between the signified (or what we think a document means) and its referent. For historians, this meant that historical research came to be seen as a much more subjective endeavour: “Facts did not present themselves directly to the historian; the historian picked and chose among them, guided by his [*sic*] ideological presuppositions.”³⁵

The influence of postmodernism was also felt in the archival world. Cook, in placing archives within the postmodern milieu, states:

The record is now perceived as a mere trace of missing universes, as a kind of trick mirror, distorting facts and past realities, reflecting the narrative intentions of its author and the receptivity of its contemporary audience as much as its actual informational content. The record thus becomes a cultural signifier, a mediated and ever-changing construction, and not some empty template into which acts and facts are poured.³⁶

³³ Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, 201; 208.

³⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 127-128.

³⁵ Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, 216.

³⁶ Terry Cook, “Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 27.

Tom Nesmith states that “the postmodern view of communication helps us to see archiving anew” because it “suggests an important new intellectual place for archives in the formation of knowledge, culture, and societies.”³⁷ Postmodern insights suggest archivists can now be seen among the new players in the formation of a record. These players are those who affect the interpretation of the record (thus what it *is*) after the initial inscription and filing of it: its custodians prior to archiving; archivists; researchers; and society in general, which affects each aspect of this history of records. The context of the creation of the record now extends beyond the initial context to the entire history of the record, including its handling by and use in archives, or its destruction for whatever reason.

The abandonment of ultimate truth and objectivity debunks Hilary Jenkinson’s vision of the archivist as “unbiased keeper” of impartial evidence. For archivists to embrace knowledge of records in the postmodern framework, they need to acknowledge their involvement in the creation of records. Eric Ketelaar coined the term “archivalisation” as the “conscious or unconscious choice (determined by social and cultural factors) to consider something worth archiving.”³⁸ Archivalisation needs to precede archiving in order to gain insight into the social and cultural context which shapes a particular record.³⁹ Nesmith is a strong advocate for the notion of archivist as creator. He states:

The idea that archives play an authoring role is based on the view that a record is a meaningful communication, which means it is a physical

³⁷ Tom Nesmith, “Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives,” *The American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 26-27.

³⁸ Eric Ketelaar, “Archivalisation and Archiving,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 27, no. 1 (May 1999): 55. Ketelaar derived the notion of archivalisation from Jacques Derrida’s concept of *archivization*. See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³⁹ Ketelaar, “Archivalisation,” 55.

object, plus an understanding or representation of that object. Some of what makes a record meaningful is inscribed in it by those who literally made it, but most of what makes a record intelligible lies outside its physical borders in its context of interpretation. Archivists, who do much to shape this context, therefore share in authoring the record.⁴⁰

Since, according to postmodern theory, the meanings of texts are in flux, archivists must acknowledge this change in archival records. "Rather than being rendered inert in archives, records continually evolve. If they are to be preserved at all, they must change. Archivists help change or re-create them in order to preserve them."⁴¹

Other recent archival scholarship has stressed the important role archivists play in moulding the context of a record's creation. Bernadine Dodge sees the archivist as a mediator between the record and the user, attempting to convey (and inevitably shaping) meaning from multiple interpretations. Since archivists deal with representations of the past, they attempt to make renditions of the past comprehensible to the researcher.⁴²

Under the mantle of postmodern theory, archival work adopts a new sort of historicism – one which deconstructs archival texts by exposing their context of creation on many different levels. Cook asserts:

Postmodern archival discourse would shift from product to process, from structure to function, from archives to archiving, from records to contexts of recording, from 'natural' residues or passive by-products of administrative activity to a consciously constructed and actively mediated 'archivalization' of social memory.⁴³

What all this means for the principle of provenance, then, is that the task of provenance goes beyond just identifying who initially inscribed the record.

⁴⁰ Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," 32.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴² Bernadine Dodge, "Archival Discourse and the (Re)presentations of the Past," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 19-20. Dodge applies these notions to the use of technology in archives, in which records' meanings are affected by digitization and reproduction.

⁴³ Terry Cook, "Postmodernism," 29.

Dimensions of Context

To begin contextual work, archivists must first unravel the societal provenance of a record. Knowledge of creators in their societal context can reveal much about the nature of the record. Nesmith gives the example of the formation of the Ontario Agricultural College (OAC) as the catalyst of much greater use of recorded communication by Ontario farmers in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. He points out that the societal context of the OAC records reveals that they were self-consciously made to try to change farming into a highly literate, scientific profession and thus uplift rural society.⁴⁴

Knowledge of societal provenance can also help reveal what is missing from the record. This is evident in John D. Wrathall's article, "Provenance as Text: Reading the Silences around Sexuality in Manuscript Collections." Using the Robert Weidensall papers at the YMCA Archives at the University of Minnesota, Wrathall gives an example of how sexuality may be silenced in archival records – silences created not only by the authors of the records but also through archival censorship.⁴⁵ He notes that a letter in the collection makes insinuations about Weidensall's homosexuality. The original had the word "omit" written in the margin, and a typewritten version of the letter, without the controversial passage, appears later in the collection. It is obvious that Weidensall wished

⁴⁴ See Tom Nesmith, "'Pen and Plough' at Ontario Agricultural College, 1874-1910," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-1985).

⁴⁵ John D. Wrathall, "Provenance as Text: Reading the Silences around Sexuality in Manuscript Collections," *The Journal of American History* (June 1992): 166.

to delete the original letter from being kept by the archives and, for some reason, it remained. His attempt to censor the content of the records failed.⁴⁶

In the case of the Weidensall papers, knowledge of the YMCA's construction of sexuality in the nineteenth century should cause researchers to ask what the documents say about sexuality and, more importantly, what is missing.⁴⁷ This is essentially the message of poststructural theorists. Societal context therefore promotes a broader interpretation of records, one that goes beyond what is written. It is the duty of the archivist to try to make this known.

The next layer of contextual knowledge that an archivist needs to unravel is the administrative context in which archives were created and used. Knowledge of the functions that an institution performs is vital to understanding the context of its records creation. Documents such as mandate statements or annual reports give clues to this, as do the types and forms of various documents. Moreover, the way records are filed within the office gives clues to what the institution's important functions are.

The knowledge of functions is vital to understanding administrative context. David Bearman and Richard Lytle implore archivists to move away from an obsession with the information content of the records and move towards knowledge of the functions and organizational culture which created the records. They state: "A *practical* understanding must be gained of organizations as living cultures or organisms which create and use information; upon this foundation, sound information management can be developed."⁴⁸ Knowledge of an organization's functional behaviour allows archivists to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 167-168.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 170.

⁴⁸ David A. Bearman and Richard H. Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985-1986): 14. Archivists should also be aware of the informal features and organizational culture

aid researchers by translating their research subject inquiries into questions about functions organizations perform which would have created records with the subject information the researcher seeks. Intimate knowledge of the types of records generated for a function – and thus the research subject – can help archivists have a more effective role in this research.⁴⁹

An institution's method of recordkeeping also shapes the creation of records and their subsequent use and provides insight into an organization. Archivists should know what recordkeeping systems exist for institutions and individuals in their charge. They should know what functions were documented on what systems, how the systems classify records and information, what indexing and retrieval tools their creators used, and how all of these features of particular recordkeeping systems may have evolved. In addition they should strive to know about the societal purposes and impact of recordkeeping. For example, the recordkeeping systems used by the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries not only display how they were used to shape and control the records themselves but also reveal how the DIA sought to use documentation to pursue the assimilation of First Nations peoples into Euro-Canadian society. The emergence of standardized forms to document every aspect of aboriginal life and in census-taking was essential in the assimilation process. Archivist Brian Hubner writes: "The power to locate, name, and identify Indians was essential to control and then change them and how they viewed themselves."⁵⁰ Archivists should seek and share

of institutions. The assumptions about society and work that people bring with them to the workplace have an impact on how they create records. See Phyllis M. Ngin, "Recordkeeping Practices of Nurses in Hospitals," *American Archivist* (Fall 1994); and Elizabeth Yakel, "The Way Things Work: Procedures, Processes and Institutional Records," *American Archivist* 59, no. 4 (Fall 1996).

⁴⁹ Bearman and Lytle, 14-15.

⁵⁰ Brian Hubner, "An Administered People': A Contextual Approach to the Study of Bureaucracy, Records-Keeping, and Records in the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs, 1755-1950," MA thesis,

insights like this into the context of recordkeeping to throw light on the meaning of the records.

Archivists also need knowledge of the context in which individual documents have been created and of their particular characteristics and categories of information they convey. Archival educator Luciana Duranti recommends that an older archival tool (diplomats) be employed again to do so, and especially to help control current electronic records. Diplomats appeared in the seventeenth century as a means of determining the authenticity of medieval documents. It studies the form and function of single documents. Duranti proposes that archivists use diplomats to gain as much descriptive detail about a document as possible, as well as to determine its authenticity.⁵¹ All documents, Duranti maintains, “present forms similar enough to make it possible to conceive of one typical, ideal documentary form, the most regular and complete, for the purpose of examining all its elements.”⁵²

Through diplomats, both the extrinsic and intrinsic components of a document are examined. The extrinsic components are those that constitute the document’s external appearance, such as medium, script, language, or seals and special signs.⁵³ The intrinsic components are those that define how a document is presented. Here, elements such as the context, substance and sections that define the content are explored.⁵⁴ This type of analysis will be used for certain records in chapter three.

University of Manitoba/University of Winnipeg, 2000, 82. For further nuances, see Terry Cook, “Paper Trails: A Study in Northern Records and Northern Administration, 1898-1958,” in Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*.

⁵¹ See Luciana Duranti, “Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science, Part I,” *Archivaria* 28 (Winter 1992).

⁵² Luciana Duranti, “Diplomatics, New Uses for an Old Science, Part V,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1994): 6. See also Leonard Boyle, “Diplomatics,” in James M. Powell, ed., *Medieval Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1976).

⁵³ Duranti, “Diplomatics, Part V,” 6-10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 11-16.

Duranti believes that knowledge of individual documents through the analysis of the context of the procedures governing their creation is central to understanding the functions of organizations. Archivist Tom Belton concurs. He believes that the use of diplomatics reinforces and clarifies provenance for users of archives by providing information about form and context in a consistent, standardized way.⁵⁵ However, many archivists do not agree that diplomatics can be applied for that purpose to most records created since the twentieth century. Susan Storch asserts that there are now too many documents to apply routinely the type of meticulous analysis of a single document required by diplomatics. Also, knowledge of functions is available in many sources, not just individual documents themselves. Moreover, diplomatics was developed specifically to authenticate medieval records, whose form and function were far less obvious than that of modern records.⁵⁶ Storch concludes that diplomatics is less useful because modern records reach the archives much quicker now than in the past. If the form and function of a document is ambiguous, the archivist could simply ask the creator or record keeper about it.⁵⁷ Diplomatics can perhaps best assist an archivist by providing a checklist of possible physical and intellectual characteristics of individual types of records that can help raise awareness of the categories of information they contain. Researchers can be guided to relevant information by the archivist's contextual knowledge of how functions, recordkeeping systems, and individual documents are related.

The final aspect of a record's context of creation to be discussed here is its pre-archival custodial history. The journey that a record made between its transcription and

⁵⁵ Tom Belton, "By Whose Warrant? Analyzing Documentary Form and Procedure," *Archivaria* 41 (Spring 1996): 219.

⁵⁶ Susan Storch, "Diplomatics: Modern Archival Method or Medieval Artifact," *American Archivist* 61 (Fall 1998): 367-368.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 381.

its arrival at the archives is a vital aspect of its context of creation. Hilary Jenkinson was especially concerned about this phase in a record's history because any breaches in proper custodial control would deprive a record of archival evidential quality. Writing in 1922, he stated, "that Archive quality is dependent upon the possibility of proving *an unblemished line of responsible custodians*."⁵⁸ In other words, records would not be archival if they were compromised in this way. This "unblemished line," according to Jenkinson, could be ensured through the implementation of administrative procedural standards to protect records from custodial lapses somewhere between their creation and their acquisition by archives.

Since these sorts of standards are difficult to enforce, the complexities and anomalies of a record's custodial history are a reality in the history of records. Thus archivists rarely exclude records from archives simply because they may not have enjoyed the "unblemished line." But that said, archivists pay insufficient attention to the impact of custodial history on the evidence or meaning records convey. Custodial history is especially important in description. Nesmith notes that the typically brief custodial history entries in archival description avoid mentioning lapses in custody in order to defend the legitimacy of the records.⁵⁹ This, however, distorts the evidence the records bear. Nesmith maintains that fuller accounts of custodial history would help add to the evidence because it would cast light on the actions of those who had custody of the records. All those who had custody of a record are its co-creators through their mere possession of the record and, of course, through any rearrangement, modification and

⁵⁸ As cited in Tom Nesmith, "Through Various Vicissitudes': Custodial History and Archival Theory," (Unpublished paper presented to the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Winnipeg, 8 June 2001), 1-2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

destruction of the record for which they may be responsible. Why the records came into their possession and their motives for keeping and/or disposing of them are also valuable aspects of this contextual custodial information. This line of inquiry would also include archivists in their archival custodial role.⁶⁰

Archivist Laura Millar also emphasizes the vital role of custodial history in understanding records and sees it as a key part in archival description. She thinks that greater attention to it would improve the description of records of the same provenance which have been physically separated among different archives. She also thinks that this would challenge the primacy of the fonds as a tool in arrangement and description. Millar notes an anomaly in the application of the fonds concept. Given that records from the same provenance, or fonds, may be physically separated in different archives, the various archives usually describe their particular holdings as *the* fonds of a particular creator. For example, the Hudson's Bay Company Archives at the Archives of Manitoba holds the vast majority of the company's records (more than 3,000 linear metres), but other institutions which hold a tiny fraction of the company's records describe them as the Hudson's Bay Company fonds.⁶¹ This, Millar says, obscures provenance and explains little of the custodial history of the records: "The intellectual reality of provenance and the physical reality of the records are not equal. One body of records can derive from many creators, and one creator can leave records in many physical locations."⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid., 11-12. Custodial history broadly conceived includes archival custodial history, but a useful distinction can be retained between pre-archival custodial history and archival custodial history. The latter's impact on the contextualization of the records (through archival selection, destruction, description, and reference service) has been discussed above in this chapter.

⁶¹ Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 5-6.

⁶² Ibid., 5.

Millar proposes that the fonds concept be set aside and provenance redefined to comprise three components, which would deal with an aspect of a custodial history that would be transformed from its traditional role into a full blown history of the records. First, creator history would describe all those “who created, accumulated, and used the records over time.” Second, records history would provide administrative history, but also include details about the records’ use, their physical movement, and any alterations or destruction of records. This component most resembles the traditional definition of custodial history, as outlined by Nesmith. The third component would be custodial history, in which the transfer of records ownership to the archives is explained. Thus, for example, the reason why two centimetres of Hudson's Bay Company records found their home outside of the Archives of Manitoba would be explained.⁶³ Custodial history affects the context of a record’s creation. Archivists should attempt to understand more of it to learn as much as possible of the records evolving meaning.

The tendency in archival theory of late has been to leave behind the absolutes and certainties of the modernist age and to encourage archivists to acknowledge their roles in the creation of records. Archivists now need to employ a research oriented approach to their work in order to deal with the complexities of human communication that postmodern theory and other critical reflections on communication now bring to the assessment and use of documentation. By stressing contextual knowledge or knowledge of a record’s history, archivists can participate effectively in this process. This approach will guide the examination of the Commissioner's Office and its records in the next two chapters.

⁶³ Ibid., 12-13.

Chapter Two

Societal and Administrative Context and the Records of the Commissioner's Office, Hudson's Bay Company, 1884-1910

As discussed in chapter one, the contextual approach to understanding archival records begins by exploring the societal context in which the records were created. Dorothy Smith states, “[v]ery little of our knowledge of people events, social relations and powers arises directly in our immediate experience. Factual statements in documentary form... stand in for an actuality which is not directly accessible.”¹ This mediating function of records and the evidence they carry can only be understood by examining the societal and other contexts in which the mediation occurs. Our pursuit of societal context can be complicated when we consider the challenge we may face in understanding the origins of a record. Jacques Derrida set written communication apart from the verbal in that, with writing, the communicator is absent while the written word continues to produce effects independent of the writer’s presence. A written sign “possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he [*sic*] wrote it.”² Derrida, however, did not dismiss the importance of attempting to understand the writer’s purpose. He pointed to the complexity of that task. Smith and Derrida imply that to understand this “social construction of documentary reality,” to use Smith’s phrase, a societal contextual analysis

¹ Dorothy E. Smith, “The Social Construction of Documentary Reality,” *Sociological Inquiry* 44 (1974): 257.

² Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 9.

is needed across the history of a record and is not confined to the initial moment of the record's inscription.

The archival task is to attempt to re-envision the societal context of a record's creation and subsequent history. For this thesis, certain aspects of this wide-ranging context will be highlighted – the perceived information needs of the Victorian British and Canadian imperial project and the business administrative context in which the Commissioner's Office records were made and managed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In an examination of the records of the Commissioner's Office, we must try to rediscover the business world in which the office operated.

As the overseas headquarters of a British trading venture, the Commissioner's Office carried with it certain presuppositions about its purpose in North America. The Commissioner's Office needed to adapt to new business methods in order to make the HBC a viable business in a rapidly changing world. This was achieved through a vast degree of centralization of the company's business in the Commissioner's Office.

Graham Lowe states that “the office is the central nervous system of modern organizations, generating, transmitting, and storing vast quantities of information.”³ The metaphor of the central nervous system could not be more succinct in describing the communication flow within the HBC, a company which not only attempted to meet modern standards of business practice, but also drew from its history as a manifestation of the British Empire in North America.

In examining the societal context of the HBC, it should be noted that all aspects cannot be investigated, given the scope of such a venture. In the interests of this thesis, I

³ Graham S. Lowe, “‘The Enormous File’: The Evolution of the Modern Office in Early Twentieth-Century Canada,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85): 137.

will look at societal aspects that pertain to the restructuring of HBC administration beginning in 1871 and how those changes affected the flow of communication and recordkeeping.

British Societal Context

To set the context for the creation of the Commissioner's Office, two continents must be crossed. As a British organization, the HBC is placed in the context of the world of mercantile trading companies and how they asserted themselves in the colonial world. For its first two centuries, the HBC operated as such a company. After 1870, however, it also had to navigate between that world and the changing business administration practices taking hold in North America. In order to remain viable, the HBC needed to adapt.

The Industrial Revolution propelled Britain to world leadership in international trade. Industrialization brought the need to exchange British-made products for raw materials. Britain played a central role in this system of world trade. Moreover, by the 1860s, it enjoyed a virtual "free trade economy" with tariff barriers falling, making Britain the world's largest foreign trader and capital exporter.⁴

British merchant firms played an important role in this success. Merchant trading companies enjoyed expanded trading opportunities as the borders of the British Empire grew. Colonial holdings provided "a unique global network of ports and markets for merchant companies to conduct business with and in."⁵ By 1700, goods from North

⁴ Geoffrey Jones, *Merchants to Multinationals: British Trading Companies in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 18-20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

America, the West Indies and Asia made up one-third of Britain's imports.⁶ Until the mid-nineteenth century, the mercantilist approach dominated colonial economic activity. Raw materials were imported from the colony, and processed and manufactured goods were exported back to the colony from the mother country with the privilege of tariff and duty protection.

In its early days, the HBC functioned within the context of British colonial economics and was typical of mercantilist chartered trade companies in operation in the seventeenth century. The Hudson's Bay Company was founded on May 2, 1670 under Royal Charter by Charles II. J.M. Bumsted describes this charter as "a fairly typical document of imperial commerce of the seventeenth century," which granted the Company of Adventurers a huge tract of land in North America's Northwest (named Rupert's Land by the HBC) for the purpose of commerce and colonization.⁷

Merchant trading companies were part of Britain's mechanism of Empire. These companies "embedded themselves in their host economies at an early stage in their modern economic development, acquiring knowledge and information," thus becoming overseas offices of the imperial forces back in Europe.⁸ Indeed, merchant companies often became the government, as was the case of the East India Company, which acted as India's colonial power beginning in 1750, well before the British government assumed this role.⁹ The HBC's role in the North American fur trade provides another example of an overseas company becoming a colonial government. The Hudson's Bay Company

⁶ Ann M. Carlos and Stephen Nicholas, "Agency Problems in Early Chartered Companies: The Case of the Hudson's Bay Company," *Journal of Economic History* Vol. 50, No. 4 (December 1990): 853.

⁷ J.M. Bumsted, *Fur Trade Wars: The Founding of Western Canada* (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 1999), 15.

⁸ Jones, 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

played this colonial role. In Rupert's Land, the HBC acted as Britain's *de facto* government and took on "the responsibility for maintaining order in the territory, a function the British government was not willing to assume."¹⁰

Eric Hobsbawm calls the period between 1875 and 1914 the "Age of Empire" in a very literal sense: "It was probably the period of modern world history in which the number of rulers officially calling themselves, or regarded by western diplomats as deserving the title of, 'emperors' was at its maximum."¹¹ Between 1870 and 1914, European imperial powers acquired an immense amount of colonial land. Almost one-quarter of the world was colonized by six European powers, and Great Britain increased its holdings by around four million square miles.¹² This took place amid significant changes in the structure of world economics. The nineteenth century saw "the creation of a single global economy, progressively reaching into the most remote corners of the world, an increasingly dense web of economic transactions, communications and movement of goods, money and people linking the developed countries with each other and with the undeveloped world."¹³

The influence of Empire over a business such as the HBC is evident in prevailing notions of recordkeeping and communication. The main theme in recent studies of colonial recordkeeping is the idea that the administrators of the British Empire believed power over its colonies could be achieved through the collection of vast quantities of

¹⁰ John S. Galbraith, *The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821-1869* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), 8.

¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), 56.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 62.

information. Fact was seen as “raw knowledge, knowledge awaiting ordering.”¹⁴ Thomas Richards calls the British Empire a “paper empire: an empire built on a series of flimsy pretexts that were always becoming texts.”¹⁵ Ann Stoler asserts that “colonial states were first and foremost information-hungry machines in which power accrued from the massive accumulation of ever-more knowledge rather than from the quality of it.”¹⁶

The colonial forces, however, often failed in their attempts to understand the colonized through the misinterpretation of knowledge gathered. Christopher Bayly asserts the British faced problems in the administration of India because of the difference between British and Indian information structures; he writes, “the basic fear of the colonial official or settler was ... his lack of indigenous knowledge and ignorance of the ‘wiles of the natives.’”¹⁷ Christopher Bracken, in his examination of European encounters with Canadian Aboriginal potlatch ceremonies, states that records failed to enlighten colonial powers about the colonized because, in their discourse, the colonial powers were usually speaking for the colonized, rather than speaking with them. Europe’s version of ethnography, he argues, was not an investigation into other cultures, but rather a means of

¹⁴ Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), 4. Richards looks to the writings of Charles Darwin as an example of comprehensive knowledge-gathering taking place in the colonial world.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ann Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 100. Bernard Cohn and Christopher Bayly both examine further the use of knowledge of the colonized as a form of control within the British colonial project in India. Separately, the two studies agree that since the British needed to manipulate indigenous systems of communication, they became familiar with the differing information orders of their colonial holdings. By co-opting Indian languages and the practices of the Indian state, the British believed they could control discourse on administrative and legal matters. Further, by amassing knowledge and by attempting to understand Indian culture and politics, the British believed they could control them. See Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) and C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ Bayly, 6.

collecting non-European cultures for itself. Writes Bracken, “[b]y adding others to itself... Europe extends its limits in the very act of trying to see past them.”¹⁸

The HBC entered the modern business age with this baggage of its colonial past. The British Empire’s obsession with central information gathering would mirror the changes in North American business that took place in the late nineteenth century.

Canadian Societal Context

With the backdrop of mercantilism and the imperial approach to recordkeeping, the HBC faced a different reality in Canada. In 1871, the HBC surrendered Rupert’s Land to Canada. All of the vast territory was turned over to Canada save 50,000 acres of land around HBC posts and five percent of prime agricultural land known as the Fertile Belt. This event changed the nature of the HBC’s business, and consequently, its administration. After the 1869 Deed of Surrender, the HBC was “relieved of the burden of governing.”¹⁹ It entered a new phase in which the company, once the virtual governing body of a vast territory, now was treated virtually as a foreign business.

With Rupert’s Land in Canadian hands, a vast stretch of land was opened for development. The Canadian Northwest, as Gerald Friesen states, was an “investment frontier” for eastern Canada.²⁰ The West’s history in the Confederation era was dominated by new technologies in transportation and communication, most notably the railway and telegraph. They were seen as great tools of progress. The railway opened up land, once impossible to traverse, to settlement. In the early 1880s, Manitoba regions and

¹⁸ Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 23.

¹⁹ Eleanor Jean Stardom, “Adapting to Altered Circumstances: Trade Commissioner Joseph Wrigley and the Hudson’s Bay Company 1884-1891” (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1987), 3.

²⁰ Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 162.

areas along rail lines grew in population at a greater pace than elsewhere, boasting a population of 25,000.²¹ At the same time, the telegraph became indispensable for such activities as banking, marketing of agriculture and ranching goods, land speculation and survey.²²

The effect of railway and telegraph technology on the HBC was to open up to competition the business territory once held in monopoly. Donald A. Smith likened the railway to the “very antithesis of the fur trade” since the railway depended on settlement and competitive commerce to survive.²³ As the HBC began to use the railway, it also lost control over the transportation of trade goods, an important aspect of its operations. Independent traders used the telegraph to ascertain which trade goods were in demand in different areas of Canada, giving them an advantage over the HBC in the speed of information transmission.²⁴ What this meant to the company was that, in order to survive, it needed to adapt and modernize to meet the challenges posed by the new technology.

More changes were afoot for the HBC. The latter part of the nineteenth century witnessed a drastic change in American and Canadian businesses as they grew in size and complexity due to the expansion of national and international markets through steamships, railways and telecommunications. Alfred Chandler, in his seminal work *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Industry*, describes the last half of

²¹ Ibid., 222.

²² David R. Richeson, “The Telegraph and Community Formation in the North-West Territories,” in John E. Foster, ed., *The Developing West: Essays on Canadian History in Honor of Lewis H. Thomas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1983), 149.

²³ A.A. den Otter, “The Hudson’s Bay Prairie Transportation Problem 1870-1885,” in J.E. Foster, ed., *The Developing West: Essays on Canadian History in Honor of Lewis H. Thomas* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press), 42. It should be noted, however, that Smith was a great promoter of the HBC’s use of the railway.

²⁴ Richeson, 148-149.

the nineteenth century as “the rise of modern business enterprise and its managers.”²⁵

Chandler recognizes three major changes in American business that took place between 1850 and 1900: the revolution in transportation, the revolution in distribution and production, and the integration of mass production with mass distribution. The economy was such that goods began to be produced and distributed at a huge scale. Furthermore, these changes were propelled by business management. Francis Blouin explains

Chandler’s theories:

This integration of mass production and mass distribution was achieved in certain sectors of the economy not through the machinations of the invisible hand of the market place as Adam Smith would have suggested, but rather through the very visible hand or activity of management.²⁶

This activity of management was based on new systems and theories which emerged in response to the changing nature of business. As the volume of activity within business grew, traditional managerial methods became inadequate for controlling organizationally complex companies, which were often spread over great geographical distances. Until the mid-nineteenth century, many business enterprises were small, run by families or partnerships which generally produced a single product or functioned for one specific manufacturing purpose. The growth of railway and telegraph led to multi-functioning companies which were able to expand their businesses across geographical distances.²⁷ The single bookkeeper was no longer able to administer an entire

²⁵ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Industry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 1.

²⁶ Francis X. Blouin, Jr., “A New Perspective on the Appraisal of Business Records: A Review,” *The American Archivist* (July 1979): 315.

²⁷ JoAnne Yates, “Internal Communication Systems in American Business Structures: A Framework to Aid Appraisal,” *American Archivist* 48, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 142. Another result was stratification within the office with the creation of two separate levels of operation: the management and the clerical. The bookkeepers and clerks of old rose to management positions while female clerks filled the routine clerical roles left vacant. These trends migrated north to Canada and by the early twentieth century women dominated clerical positions. See Lowe, 139-140.

organization. For the late-nineteenth century manager, the answer lay in centralizing control through bureaucratic administrative structures and drastically altering communication methods. New techniques of systematic management were developed to increase managerial control in decision-making over all levels of a company.

Systematic management, as it was later named, stressed efficiency and rationality and sought to give managers complete control over their internal office as well as business done at a distance. Further, the new management style “promoted rational and impersonal systems in preference to personal and idiosyncratic leadership for maintaining efficiency in a firm’s operations.”²⁸ The written record began to replace memory. As the numbers of staff grew, standard procedures became the key to smooth operation. JoAnne Yates argues that systematic management led to the establishment of control mechanisms which promoted routine procedures and the use of standard forms for repetitive tasks. Ultimately, systematic management stressed the creation of organizational memory which could be controlled through standardized procedures and forms.²⁹

This increased predictability was necessary (given the growing complexity and speed of business) and changed how business operations were conducted. Although the HBC was already a large record-based company by the time of the changes Chandler and Yates outline, it shared some of the key features of the business world emerging at the end of the nineteenth century that they describe. The company may not have moved as dramatically as other businesses into this new system of management and record keeping, but it did respond to various nineteenth-century developments by adopting many of the administrative measures outlined in systematic management theory. This was done in

²⁸ JoAnne Yates, *Control Through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 1.

²⁹ Yates, “Internal Communication,” 146.

order to remain a viable force in its fur trade, retail and land sales businesses and to keep up with competition.

HBC Administrative Context

The drastically altered business landscape facing the HBC in Canada prompted efforts to modernize its business practices. The company was no longer the British arm of colonial government in the Canadian Northwest. The sale made the HBC just one of many retail and fur trade businesses in Canada with significant competition to worry about for the first time since 1821. The HBC needed to transform itself into a modern diversified business while keeping the fur trade viable, and it needed to do so with professional managers in charge instead of the archaic administration of overseas governors.

Beginning in the 1850s, the HBC's hegemony over the fur trade began to be challenged by various interests. Business interests in Canada, looking to enter the fur trade, called for the end of the HBC monopoly.³⁰ At the same time in Britain, machine industry led to the decline in demand for beaver fur in hat making, as silk and fancy fur took its place.³¹ The fur trade was hindered further by a boom in retail business caused by growing agricultural settlement. In the 1870s, a western provision trade and wholesale business grew, controlled by five Winnipeg store owners, who enjoyed hegemony over wholesale and retail and were involved in grain purchase and even some fur trade. Their

³⁰ Galbraith, 335.

³¹ Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (1930; reprint, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 341.

control lasted until 1880s when eastern competition moved in.³² The saleshop business boomed at the expense of the fur trade. But as the fur trade declined, the HBC began to turn its attention to land settlement. The large chunk of land that it kept after the sale of Rupert's Land placed the HBC in a position to profit from land sales.

In order to compete with this shift in economics, the HBC needed to overhaul its administration, something that had not happened in any significant way in the company's entire two-hundred year history. From 1670 to 1815, the HBC had barely changed its administration. Chartered trade companies like the HBC had traditionally been characterized by joint stock ownership. Given the risky nature of overseas trade ventures, joint ownership meant that enough capital could be raised at minimal risk. Moreover, the board of directors of the HBC enjoyed ultimate managerial control while the shareholders footed the bill.³³ The shareholders of the HBC, who met periodically, came from among a few families and business associates; the composition of this group seldom changed. John S. Galbraith cites eighteen proprietors in 1670, and sixty-four in 1822.³⁴ Significant decisions were made almost exclusively by the Governor and Committee in London. This committee was comprised of a governor, deputy governor and initially seven committee members, although this number changed over the years with a series of supplemental charters. The Governor and Committee was the executive voice for the HBC's shareholders. They alone held executive power until the formation of the Canadian Committee in 1931. All decisions pertaining to North American matters were finalized by

³² Donald Kerr, "Wholesale Trade on the Canadian Plains in the Late Nineteenth Century: Winnipeg and its Competition," in H. Palmer, ed. *The Settlement of the West* (Calgary: Comprint, 1977), 130-133.

³³ Hugh Grant, "Bookkeeping in the Eighteenth Century: The Grand Journal and Grand Ledger of the Hudson's Bay Company," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 145.

³⁴ Galbraith, 14.

the Governor and Committee. Sub-committees administered daily business such as the purchase of supplies, management of ships, inventories and sales of furs.

Graham Taylor and Peter Baskerville call the HBC's first half century "an era of managerial experimentation" in which administration was done through salaried administrators and a large hierarchical and bureaucratic structure, which was necessary for large numbers of overseas transactions.³⁵ In Rupert's Land, the managerial structure developed in response to the problems faced in managing shipment of cargo over the vast distance between factories on Hudson Bay. Before 1815, a governor and deputy governor of Rupert's Land were stationed at one of the main factories along Hudson Bay and James Bay, including Fort Nelson (later called York Factory), Charles Fort (Rupert House), Moose Factory or Albany. These two, along with the factory surgeon or chief factor, made up the North American governing council. This administration ran the trade and transshipment system. Goods destined for particular posts were given the mark of that post and packed in such a way as to prevent confusion and delay. The governor and his council of factors organized the shipment of furs, trade goods and provisions, as well as the transfer and exchange of supplies and country produce. This was done through a system of vessels and controlled use of bills of lading, indents and other shipping records.³⁶

To administer this vast territory and restrict competition, the HBC needed close control over its North American employees. The HBC attempted to maintain rigid centralized control from London. However, this meant that the officers in Rupert's Land had little input into the company's affairs. Since these officers were the ones with

³⁵ Graham D. Taylor and Peter A. Baskerville, *A Concise History of Business in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1994), 45.

³⁶ Innis, 128.

intimate knowledge of the special circumstances surrounding the trade in their particular regions, instructions authorized from London and received only once a year in Rupert's Land "were not sufficiently flexible to meet all contingencies of a local character."³⁷

Furthermore, private trading by HBC officers was a particular concern. Governing from a distance complicated the HBC's quest for monopoly control of the fur trade. Carlos and Nicholas state that servants and officers were able to indulge in private trade in situations where the exchange of information was unequal. Since the officers knew more about conditions in Rupert's Land, the accounting of the outputs of the fur trade could not be conclusively linked to the inputs of managers. In other words, it was easy for HBC officers to trade more furs than were accounted for in the yearly fur returns sent to London. This was a problem universally faced by early chartered companies.³⁸

Part of the problem can be traced to the compensation system for employees. Before 1809, HBC officers were salaried employees who earned annual salary premiums based on their yearly tally of furs shipped. This system proved unworkable as the desire to receive premiums encouraged fierce competition between district traders. Moreover, the monetary value of the incentive premiums were based on the value of the individual furs traded and not on the actual profit gained from the trade transaction. Therefore the traders could purchase furs at any price and still receive their premiums. This system caused profits to go down for the company.³⁹

Beginning in 1809, steps were taken to alleviate these problems. In 1809, the HBC adopted the NWC practice of profit-sharing for commissioned officers. Officers now found themselves with increased job security and greater say in the management of

³⁷ Ibid., 143.

³⁸ Carlos and Nicholas, 857.

³⁹ Taylor and Baskerville, 89.

the fur trade. These positions remained superior to the salaried clerks, from whose ranks commissioned officers usually emerged.⁴⁰ The next year, the trading districts in Rupert's Land were divided into two trading departments, Northern and Southern. A governor and council were placed in charge of each. The Montreal Department was added in 1826 and the Western and Oregon Departments in 1853. Within each department, trading districts operated whose boundaries were determined by river transportation routes. The districts were administered by a chief factor or chief trader who made his headquarters at one of the posts within the district. Posts were usually operated by chief traders or clerks. For each district under its control, the departments determined personnel, fixed the sum of goods per season and determined supplies to be drawn and transferred from one district to another.⁴¹ Despite these functions, the governors of the Northern and Southern Departments were still under the direct control of the Governor and Committee.

In 1815, in the name of even greater overseas control, the position of governor in chief of Rupert's Land was created. The governors of the Northern and Southern Departments now reported to this office. After the 1821 amalgamation of the HBC and the North West Company (NWC), the office of governor in chief was dissolved and the two departmental governors again answered directly to the Governor and Committee. In 1826, George Simpson became the sole governor but was not formally recognized as such until 1839. Simpson became the overseas embodiment of the Governor and Committee. As A.S. Morton states, "[t]heir will was carried into effect through him."⁴²

⁴⁰ Philip Goldring, "Labour Records of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1870," *Archivaria* 11 (Winter 1980/81): 55.

⁴¹ A.S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 696.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 694.

Governor-in-Chief George Simpson achieved a great degree of centralized control. Post activities came under greater control from his office and became more routinized. As Taylor and Baskerville state, “all were subordinated to and in effect simply cogs of a larger process the dynamics of which were increasingly charted and controlled by a central bureaucracy.”⁴³

Despite their shares in the company, officers found themselves with little actual power. Annual council meetings with chief traders and chief factors gave the illusion of power for the officers, but in reality Simpson called all the shots and officers were “treated less as partners and more as employees” by Simpson.⁴⁴

Simpson died in 1860. Three years later, all HBC shares were sold to the International Financial Society, an investment company formed merely two weeks before their purchase.⁴⁵ Until this sale, the Governor and Committee’s decisions went largely unchallenged by the shareholders, simply because most of the shareholders were also committee directors. The meetings between the two were often shrouded in secrecy, probably, as Galbraith postulates, as a “safeguard against actual and potential competitors.”⁴⁶ With the sale, this totalitarian decision-making ended. The old system of nepotism and secrecy came to an end.

One of the results of the sale was weakened control over the HBC’s labour force. Morale dropped since the proceeds from the sale went to the shareholders and not the officers, and negotiations for the sale went on behind the officers’ backs. As Innis states, “[t]he disappearance of control of the wintering partners began in the centralization

⁴³ Taylor and Baskerville, 98.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Galbraith, 386-387.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 15.

policy of Sir George Simpson but it was not until after his death and the reorganization of the Company in England in 1863 that the change became pronounced.”⁴⁷

All this propelled the HBC forward into a new era, in which it not only had to deal with rising competition in the fur trade, but also the realization that it needed to focus on land and retail business in recognition that the “empire of furs must give way to the farmer.”⁴⁸ In order to stay competitive on all these fronts, Canadian administration needed to be modernized.

After the Deed of Surrender, three phases of administrative change can be detected. The first was in 1871, with the creation of the position of chief commissioner, replacing the position of governor of Rupert’s Land. This phase, led by Chief Commissioners Donald Smith and James A. Grahame, was marked by forays into the land business and by revised transportation and communication systems. This phase was still characterized by the reserve of the old company. The second administrative change occurred in 1884 with the appointment of Joseph Wrigley as commissioner, a man who came from outside of the HBC’s traditional officer ranks. The third phase began in 1891 when Clarence Chipman became commissioner and centralized all Canadian operations in his office.

The surrender of Rupert’s Land to Canada, coupled with the declining morale of commissioned officers led to the HBC’s third Deed Poll in 1871.⁴⁹ The proceeds of the sales both to the International Financial Society in 1863 and the surrender of the original charter in 1869 had gone exclusively to the HBC’s shareholders. In this new Deed Poll

⁴⁷ Innis, 355.

⁴⁸ Galbraith, 428.

⁴⁹ The Deed Polls of 1821, 1834 and 1871 were the legal statements which determined the number of commissioned officers of the HBC and their share in the profits of the fur trade.

the wintering partners were apportioned 100 shares – an increase from the previous 82 shares – of 40 per cent of fur trade returns. The number of commissioned ranks rose to five from the previous two, comprised of inspecting chief factors, chief factors, factors, chief traders and junior chief traders.⁵⁰ However, the Deed Poll made no provisions for the officers to gain dividends from land sales. To add insult to injury, the Deed Poll gave the responsibility for management of HBC land reserves to the officers. These actions were demoralizing for the officers, whom Morris Zaslow refers to as the “aristocrats of the fur trade.”⁵¹

Also in 1871, when the new office of chief commissioner replaced that of the governor of Rupert’s Land, it assumed responsibility for all Canadian business and reported to the board of the Governor and Committee. All aspects of the fur, sales and land businesses were under the chief commissioner’s control and all officers were answerable to him. The four geographic departments also came under his control. The chief commissioner received a salary and did not participate in the profit-sharing.⁵²

Donald A. Smith was appointed commissioner on June 1, 1871 and, a year later, was appointed chief commissioner. Smith had a long history in the fur trade, working his way up from the rank of apprentice clerk where he began in 1838. Using his years of acquired knowledge, Smith placed the HBC on firmer ground by abandoning unprofitable posts and revamping the company’s transportation system.⁵³

⁵⁰ Archives of Manitoba, Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA), Memorandum to the Secretary from R.H.G. Levenson Gower, 28 April 1932, in Commissioned Officers Search File.

⁵¹ Morris Zaslow, *The Opening of the Canadian North, 1870-1914* (Toronto: McClland and Stewart, 1971), 53-54. This loss of esteem for the officers is a far cry from A.S. Morton’s depiction of chief factors and chief traders: “Their command of the natives and their control of their servants excited admiration in such travellers as saw them in action.” Morton, 690.

⁵² HBCA, memo from Gower, p. 7.

⁵³ Stardom, 16-18.

In 1874, Donald Smith moved into the new position of land commissioner. As land sales increased, responsibility for operating both trade and land operations became too much for one man.⁵⁴ Smith's successor as chief commissioner was James Allan Grahame, another company man who had worked in both the Northern and Western Departments. This experience qualified Grahame to oversee the reorganization of the transportation system.⁵⁵

Both Smith and Grahame made significant changes in the HBC's transportation system. After the transfer of Rupert's Land, the nature of fur trade changed in that its focus shifted north to the Athabasca and Mackenzie River areas because of increasing competition in the traditional fur trade districts. However, the costs involved in moving into the North were great. This prompted Smith to adopt steamboat transportation to reduce operating expenses. It was hoped that "by utilizing steamboats on the prairie waterways in conjunction with existing rail and steamer connections between England and the Red River ... all trade goods could be shipped into the country in a single season, thereby avoiding the customary, costly winter storage at Norway House."⁵⁶ In 1872, under the leadership of Smith, the steamer *Chief Commissioner* was launched on Lake Winnipeg, followed by the *Colville* and *Northcote*.⁵⁷

Grahame furthered Smith's transportation reorganization by promoting steamboat transportation. In 1874, the end of the old era dawned as the last York boat travelled from the Swan River District to York Factory. Four years later, the Northern Department headquarters and depot were moved from York Factory to Winnipeg, signaling the end of

⁵⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁶ den Otter, 28.

⁵⁷ The *Chief Commissioner* proved to be a failure and the *Colville* was lost in the rapids at Grand Rapids. Stardom, 18.

the traditional North-South river transportation routes in favour of rail lines, running East-West.⁵⁸ This change also meant that the control of the Northern Department moved directly into the chief commissioner's hands.

This centralization meant declining initiative among interior traders. Innis comments: "The more direct control which followed improved transportation tended to disregard the interests of the individual trader. The net result was the abandonment of the old partnership arrangements and the appointment of the personnel on a contract basis."⁵⁹

The land department was operated by Donald Smith until June 1, 1879, when Charles John Brydges replaced him as land commissioner. Brydges took more aggressive steps in land sales than his predecessor and transformed the land department office by increasing the office clerical staff which included employing its own accountant. Brydges also moved the Land Department office from Montreal to Winnipeg.⁶⁰ Brydges' appointment as land commissioner was significant as he was the first administrator to be appointed from outside of the traditional HBC ranks. As such, he had few reservations about going against company traditions.⁶¹ A new era of HBC management was beginning, bringing with it clashes between the old guard and new management.

In 1884, a second administrative shift changed how the HBC's Canadian operations were run and signaled a new era of modern management and centralization. That year, Grahame was removed as chief commissioner and replaced by Joseph Wrigley, who assumed the title of trade commissioner. His position put him in charge of trade which, in essence, gave him the same responsibilities as the previous chief

⁵⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁵⁹ Innis, 354-355.

⁶⁰ Paul Nigol, "Efficiency and Economy: Commissioner C.C. Chipman and the Hudson's Bay Company, 1891-1911" (MA thesis, University of Manitoba, 1994), 76-86.

⁶¹ Ibid., 79.

commissioner. That same year, the Canadian Sub-Committee was formed, consisting of Donald Smith and Sandford Fleming. Formed in response to rumours of mismanagement by HBC officers, the sub-committee had limited executive powers, but the right to approve all purchases of North American goods and be informed of all land sales.⁶² By 1892, it was no longer in operation.

Wrigley's appointment as trade commissioner propelled the HBC into uncharted waters. Wrigley, like Brydges, came to the HBC from outside of the company. Wrigley had been hired for his commercial expertise and had no direct fur trade experience. He came to the HBC from his family's textile manufacturing business in Huddersfield and had served as president of the Huddersfield Chamber of Commerce.⁶³ After being hired by the HBC, Wrigley was commissioned to bring modern commercial principles, such as those espoused by systematic management, into the ailing fur trade. He also became, for the first time, a salaried manager. His hiring was unprecedented in the HBC's long history. As Eleanor Stardom states, "[w]hat Wrigley had to confront was an organization with two hundred years of tradition run by men who had spent all their adult lives in the trade."⁶⁴

Wrigley's largest and most daunting task was to reorganize the HBC's trade system in order to make it more profitable and competitive. The key to improving the trade system was to overhaul the methods of communication between the posts and districts and the Winnipeg office, as well as to update the substandard accounting procedures. This meant greater centralization in Winnipeg through the flow of communication.

⁶² Stardom, 48-49.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 101.

Wrigley saw the need for greater administrative reorganization through the centralization of the four departments. As it stood, the Commissioner's Office had direct control over Northern Department operations since its headquarters had been moved to Winnipeg in 1873. The other three departments still reported directly to the Governor and Committee in London. Wrigley called for "all Departments to be in the same position with regard to the Commissioner and that he should correspond with Officers in charge of Districts of all Departments as he now does with those of the Northern."⁶⁵ In particular, Wrigley felt that the operations of the Western and Montreal Department could benefit from centralized North American control, given the distance between Winnipeg and the departmental headquarters at Victoria and Montreal.⁶⁶ Wrigley, however, could not persuade the board and complete centralization of operations did not come into effect until 1891 under Wrigley's successor, C.C. Chipman.

When Wrigley entered the Commissioner's Office in 1884, meager, haphazard accounting procedures and recordkeeping made it impossible to measure the success of districts or posts. The indenting procedures in practice made it difficult for Wrigley to keep track of how much purchasing was done or the amount of capital invested in each district. While accounting of the Northern Department was conducted through Wrigley's office, the other three departments all indented directly to London, thus Wrigley had no control over those departments' purchasing. Wrigley proposed that all indents should come through his office through careful bookkeeping and orderly balance sheets prepared at the post and district level. This meant that control of all supplies and goods going to

⁶⁵ HBCA, A.12/27 fo. 330, Joseph Wrigley to David Armit, 18 May 1885.

⁶⁶ HBCA, A.12/27 fo. 383, Wrigley to Armit, 6 July 1885.

the districts and posts was in Wrigley's hands and not under the control of the district managers.⁶⁷

Wrigley set standardized procedures for communication between the posts and Commissioner's Office. Most notably, loose printed forms were used for all transactions and personnel matters. The effect, as Mark Walsh notes, was to attempt to "place more and better information at the disposal of the departmental offices in a much shorter period of time than had otherwise been the case."⁶⁸

One of the problems with these new accounting forms was that many post managers had trouble filling out the complex returns. "It was found that many excellent traders and servants could not fill out the simplest records and instruction by correspondence rarely worked."⁶⁹

Another method of ensuring greater centralized control was the creation of inspection reports. Under the inspection system, the position of inspecting officer was created, which was different from the inspecting chief factor, a position created in the 1871 Deed Poll:

I would not give Inspectors charge of specified Districts as it possibly would involve an interference with the responsibility of Officers in charge of Districts and doubts might be raised as to where responsibility is to be fixed. I would suggest Bank Inspectors as a model. At first one, or at most two, might be appointed and placed at the disposal of the Commissioner. They could then be sent by him to any Department, District or Post, make inquiries as instructed and report. Changes could then be promptly made on the responsibility of the Commissioner and be much more effective than through a subordinate Office...⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Stardom, 142-143.

⁶⁸ Mark Walsh, "By Packtrain and Steamer: The Hudson's Bay Company's British Columbia District Manager's Correspondence, 1897-1920," *Archivaria* 20 (Summer 1985): 129-130.

⁶⁹ Stardom, 143.

⁷⁰ HBCA, A.12/27 fo. 329, Wrigley to Armit, 18 May 1885.

The inspecting officer was made a salaried position and held no rank. These officers reported directly to the Commissioner's Office. Wrigley was careful to attempt to ensure that the inspecting officers' duties did not undermine the authority of district managers by not fixing them to a specific district.

The new system of inspection was successful and Wrigley felt "considerable confidence that the best mode of inspection has been adopted."⁷¹ However, despite his effort to avoid stepping on the toes of the commissioned officers, one of the biggest effects of this new centralization was the relative loss of their autonomy. The role of officers had been on a continuous decline since the 1863 sale of the HBC to the International Financial Society. Inspecting officers became targets of resentment, since officers felt that they themselves had intimate knowledge of and responsibility for their districts. Morris Zaslow outlines further complaints:

The stricter system of accounting designed to give realistic financial pictures of every post – a necessity if the trade was to survive – was resented as an interference and a prying into their domestic arrangements. Furthermore, the bookkeeping methods of the district office in Winnipeg were widely distrusted.... Traders also alleged that they were regularly charged for goods – notably liquor – which they never received, and that they were constantly hampered by shortages of important goods that were intercepted by traders situated nearer the supply centre.⁷²

Stardom notes that Smith and Grahame, both of whom had risen through the officer ranks of the company, respected the commissioned officers and enjoyed their respect. Wrigley, however, came to the office as an outsider and thus had to gain respect and perhaps was less sympathetic to their needs.⁷³ In fact, he did little to gain the favour of the officers. This was most evident on August 30, 1888 at the last meeting of the

⁷¹ HBCA, A.12/28 fo. 510, Wrigley to Armit, 21 October 1887.

⁷² Zaslow, 61.

⁷³ Stardom, 155.

council of commissioned officers, held in Winnipeg. It was announced that the issuance of commissions to clerks or servants who had entered the service of the company since the transfer in 1870 had ceased. This event “left many servants of the Company dissatisfied, promoted disloyalty, and furthered competitive efforts.”⁷⁴ It did, however, turn the HBC towards the more modern practice of having salaried employees.

At this meeting, a set of new rules and regulations, drafted by Wrigley in 1887, was discussed. These 104 rules covered all aspects of the fur trade, including rules on district management, recordkeeping and the keeping of accounts. Stardom cites these rules and regulations as evidence of Wrigley’s more business-like approach to the fur trade: “Where its predecessor was little more than a compendium of rules which was expanded to meet new situations as they arose, Wrigley’s set of rules was an attempt to create a definitive guideline.”⁷⁵ The content of these rules and regulations will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

Improvements in the transportation system went hand in hand with improvements in communication which, as Innis states, led to greater centralized control.⁷⁶ The most significant turn in transportation came with the use of railway, first embarked upon by Wrigley’s predecessors, Smith and Grahame. In 1885, Wrigley negotiated a discount with the CPR on all freight travelling to Montreal, with the exception of flour. A rebate was also given on the section of line east of Winnipeg.⁷⁷

Wrigley also employed the telegraph in the name of greater efficiency and to deal with the threat of competition. The telegraph had broken the HBC’s former monopoly on

⁷⁴ Innis, 356.

⁷⁵ Stardom, 184.

⁷⁶ Innis, 360.

⁷⁷ den Otter, 43.

market information. Small fur buyers and raw fur dealers used the telegraph as a means of keeping in contact with buying agents and thus were often better informed about fur prices and the state of the market than were HBC traders.⁷⁸ In order to compete, Wrigley used the telegraph to stay informed about changing fur prices and thus be able to adjust tariff rates accordingly.⁷⁹

The legacy of Wrigley was more control over the fur trade through the modernization of the HBC's accounting system and greater centralized control. Systemized accounts and statements, as well as regular inspection reports, meant that the commissioner had direct control over individual salesshops and posts. The effect was the diminished role for commissioned officers who lost much of their power.⁸⁰

On May 1, 1891, Clarence Campbell Chipman replaced Joseph Wrigley as trade commissioner. At around the same time, recordkeeping work within the Commissioner's Office was departmentalized by the creation of the Accountant's Department. This department, comprised mainly of an accountant and a few clerks, handled the accounts and personnel records submitted to the office by the fur trade and salesshop operations. By December, Chipman was made chief commissioner and placed in charge of both trade and land operations. The HBC then experienced an even greater degree of centralization in the name of modernization.

Like Wrigley, Chipman came to the Commissioner's Office from outside the HBC. His background was in the Canadian civil service, working in the Departments of Agriculture, Public Works, Finance, and Railways and Canals. From 1884 to 1888, he

⁷⁸ Arthur J. Ray, *The Canadian Fur Trade in the Industrial Age* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 66-67.

⁷⁹ Stardom, 118.

⁸⁰ Nigol, 4.

served as private secretary to the High Commissioner for Canada in London, Sir Charles Tupper. Chipman, born in Nova Scotia, was also the first HBC manager born in Canada.⁸¹

Chipman was charged with overhauling and modernizing the North American administration. His first task was to inspect all operations and report back to the Governor and Committee, “the better to enable them to take such further measures as may be necessary for bringing the administration of the business more into harmony with the ever-changing circumstances and the greatly increased competition with which it has now to contend.”⁸²

Based on his findings, Chipman managed to centralize control in the Commissioner's Office to a much greater degree than his predecessor had. When he became commissioner in December 1891, Chipman consolidated in his office central control of all North American operations. He was determined to make the HBC a modern commercial enterprise through his watchwords of “economy with efficiency.”⁸³ Chipman pursued this end through modernization of recordkeeping practices. He was, as Mark Walsh states, “determined to make communication the cornerstone of his management fortress.”⁸⁴ One of his first acts was to extinguish the four old geographic departments – Northern, Southern, Montreal and Western – and to create instead three departments based on function: Land, Salesshop and Fur Trade. Salesshop business was separated from the fur trade, and posts with retail operations were placed under the administration of the

⁸¹ Ibid., 1-2.

⁸² Hudson's Bay Company, *Reports of the Governor and Committee of the Hudson's Bay Company, to be Laid Before the Shareholders* (London: Sir Joseph Causton & Sons, 1882-1891), 22 July 1891, 6.

⁸³ HBCA, D.26/2 fo. 7, Commissioner Chipman's report on Hudson's Bay Company administration, August 1892.

⁸⁴ Walsh, 129.

Saleshop Department. The three departments all fell under Chipman's direct control and all districts and saleshops directed their communications to him.⁸⁵ His control over the Land Department, however, was weaker. While Chipman dealt directly with trade and retail operations, he assumed a supervisory role in the land department. All major decisions on land were made in London based on reports compiled in the Commissioner's Office.⁸⁶

Paul Nigol notes that this centralization was possible by the 1890s due to the advancements in communication technology. The transatlantic cable, transcontinental railway and telegraph gave Chipman the ability to communicate effectively with remote regions of Canada and made communication with the Governor and Committee quicker. Centralization in the Commissioner's Office thus became more cost effective as all communication was now filtered through this office.⁸⁷ The Governor and Committee also acknowledged this:

[T]he new Commissioner, Mr. Chipman, is effecting very considerable reductions in expenses of management, rendered possible now that improved means of communication bring many of the Company's Posts more under the control of the central authority of Winnipeg. It is estimated that by changes already decided upon a reduction of £10 000 in annual working expenses will be accomplished.⁸⁸

In 1897, the HBC's inspection system was revised to ensure that separate inspections of the fur trade districts and saleshops were conducted. This system also gave the inspecting officers greater power. Under the previous inspection system, reports were submitted by the inspecting officers to the Commissioner's Office, which then passed recommendations for change to the district managers. Under the new system,

⁸⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁸⁶ Nigol, 76-77.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 51.

⁸⁸ HBC, *Reports Governor and Committee*, (1892-1911), 14 July 1892, 6.

inspecting officers were given the power to make changes at the posts and in the districts, further undermining the authority and autonomy of district managers.⁸⁹ Beginning in 1902, yearly inspections of each saleshop were conducted as a continuous audit. Moreover, "each inspection was to be dated and submitted to Chipman immediately upon the completion of a statement of the books, cash and vouchers. In addition a tabulated statement of outstanding balances and their probable value was also required."⁹⁰

Chipman continued Wrigley's program of employee reform and restructured the HBC into a modern business. Under the banner of "efficiency through economy," Chipman was not shy about reminding the commissioned officers "that they must work intelligently and industriously, or give way to others."⁹¹ In 1893, the profit sharing system for HBC fur trade officers was eliminated, concluding the move towards salaried employees that Wrigley had started. This move simplified recordkeeping significantly by placing all business operations in one set of accounts. It was no longer necessary to separately account for fur trade balances, from which the officers would gain their shares.⁹² Moreover, as the HBC's saleshop business moved towards a department store business, finding staff from within the ranks of the old "Wintering Partners" to run a modern department store was highly unlikely. The answer lay in hiring staff with accounting or business experience.⁹³ In 1902, the move toward professional managers took a step further as the fur trade apprentice system was abandoned. The old system had been in place over the company's history as a means of grooming servants for the officer

⁸⁹ Nigol, 30-31.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 64-65.

⁹¹ HBCA, D.26/2 fo. 9, Commissioner's report to HBC administration, August 1892.

⁹² Zaslow, 62. Zaslow also notes that by 1895 fur trade accounts were absent altogether from the annual report.

⁹³ Nigol, 58-61.

ranks. Now, post managers, like the executives above them, were hired based on their knowledge of business or the country.⁹⁴ The officers, once partners in the HBC, were now merely salaried employees.

This was a major blow to the fur trade officers. Chipman's concern with fiscal efficiency and centralization did little to acknowledge the needs of the officers. They had complaints against his "petty economics, the despotic tone of his instructions or commands, and the cruel treatment meted out to veteran officers who, it was charged, were being goaded into resigning to replace them with low-salaried clerks."⁹⁵

In 1910, the operations of the Commissioner's Office were decentralized and its operations were divided into the Fur Trade, Salesshop and Land Departments. The Commissioner's Office, as it once had been, essentially disintegrated. By that point, the salesshop business had become too big for one commissioner to administer along with the trade and land departments. On October 1 of that year, Chipman was appointed the new land commissioner, while Herbert E. Burbidge and Robert H. Hall became salesshops and fur trade commissioners respectively. The three commissioners still shared the same Winnipeg office but the era of intense centralization was over.

Conclusion

The societal and administrative contexts in which the records of the Commissioner's Office were created had an enormous impact on them. The HBC's commitment to voluminous and systematic recordkeeping reflects the wider strategy of the leaders of the British imperial project to control their far-flung business and political

⁹⁴ Ibid., 34-35.

⁹⁵ Zaslow, 61.

activities through communication. The Commissioner's Office's concern about improving recordkeeping also reflected wider North American business management trends, which sought to cope with the complexities of modern business through greater control of communications. The Commissioner's Office sought to centralize operations by directing the flow of all communications to the office. Chapter three will discuss the particular characteristics of recordkeeping in the Commissioner's Office in more detail.

Chapter Three

Records and Recordkeeping in the Commissioner's Office, 1884-1910

As was discussed in chapter two, the Commissioner's Office sought greater control through centralization of recordkeeping and the flow of communication. The increasingly centralized control in Winnipeg after 1870 reflected the desire of the HBC to infuse modern systematic management practices into its long tradition of using recordkeeping as a means of control. The vestiges of the HBC's colonial past are evident. As the last chapter mentioned, both advocates of systematic management and British imperialists practised sophisticated recordkeeping as a means to control knowledge. Archival analyses of recordkeeping practices and individual records provide insight into the intentions of organizations as well as the society in which they operated. As Stoler argues, records and recordkeeping practices "[are] not to be read randomly in any which way."¹ Moreover, Jacques Derrida notes that through the medium of print, a record is entrusted to the "outside," that is, the public.² By examining the recordkeeping methods and flow of communication within the Commissioner's Office through contextual analysis, we can contribute to this external reading. The Commissioner's Office records offer a unique opportunity to examine a facet of the records of a company which had long attempted to keep meticulous account of its business transactions.³

Business historian JoAnne Yates outlines three ways in which records flow within systematic management practices: downward, upward and laterally. By applying Yates'

¹ Stoler, 98.

² Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 8.

³ For an overview of the history of the HBC archives and company recordkeeping, see Deidre Simmons, "The Archives of the Hudson's Bay Company," *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996).

model to an examination of selected records kept by the Commissioner's Office, I will attempt to place these records within the context of the duality of the HBC's attempts at modernization while still retaining the recordkeeping systems that had been employed for some 200 years. The majority of the records examined were created during the tenures of Trade Commissioner Joseph Wrigley and Chief Commissioner C.C. Chipman, who served the company from 1884 until the decentralization of the Commissioner's Office in 1910. The sheer proliferation of records kept during Commissioner's Office in this period reflects the increasing centralized control placed on the office. Some examination of records kept by Commissioners Donald Smith and James A. Grahame will also be undertaken but their records are far overshadowed by the records created by their successors. While the records reflect the HBC's business ventures in both the fur trade and retail, this paper will concentrate on the company's fur trade business.

Records and Recordkeeping in Systematic Management

As was discussed in chapter two, many American and Canadian businesses in the late nineteenth century were transformed through the implementation of new systematic management theories. Under systematic management, the flow of communication was routed towards a business' central head office in order to exercise greater control over increasingly complex and diversified ventures. The types of records kept by the Commissioner's Office reflect this altered flow of information and new forms of recordkeeping that accompanied this new era of business management.

Prior to the systematic management era, written correspondence was used minimally, both to document monetary transactions and to informally communicate with

company members or business partners. Little internal communication was recorded.⁴

The change from oral communication to the use of paper transferred business operations from small ventures into bureaucracies. This transition, however, arrived gradually. In the early nineteenth century, the typical one-room office was staffed by a bookkeeper who was assisted by a junior clerk. It was characterized by “informal social relations, unsystematic administrative procedures, and a minimal amount of records,” as most administrative matters were kept in the memory of the bookkeeper.⁵ Some accounting records were kept but served mainly as documentation of transactions for future reference. Yates describes these as “simple, descriptive records of monetary transactions, kept originally in large bound books.”⁶

With the advent of systematic management, control was imposed through formal documentation at all levels of communication flow: downward, from management to the lower levels; upward, from the lower ranks to management; and laterally, at the middle levels of a business, to coordinate downward and upward flow.⁷

The emphasis on downward flow of communication ensured that activities and procedures in the lower ranks of an organization were consistent and standardized. Rules and policies were conveyed to the lower levels through new genres of communication such as circular letters, manuals and general orders. Railroad companies were among the first businesses to use circular letters and general orders as part of their regular communication, a practice that proved effective to ensure consistency when delivering instructions on safety and changes in regulations. Written orders also ensured that

⁴ Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 2.

⁵ Lowe, 138.

⁶ Yates, “Internal Communication,” 144.

⁷ Yates, *Control Through Communication*, xvii.

directions were not miscommunicated or misinterpreted through the shortcomings of memory, and provided a ready reference point should disputes over the terms of orders emerge.⁸ Manuals were deemed important for establishing lines of authority, in what Yates describes as “an attempt to transcend the individual and create an organizational memory.”⁹

The flow of communication upward towards management took the form of data and analysis to ensure that all activities in the lower ranks could be controlled. Reports became the main form by which this type of information reached managers. Yates cites two types of reports. The first are routine or periodic reports which contain day-to-day operational information and are written at regular intervals. They followed standardized formats, often on printed forms. The second are special reports which provide information on a specific problem or aspect of business. Yates writes that “the routine report became a particularly important managerial tool, assuring a regular flow of data to be used for monitoring efficiency.”¹⁰

The memorandum became the main form of internal written communication within the office, marking a drastic shift in style from the external letter. The formal styles which defined the letter were abandoned in memoranda, as efficiency and functionality dictated form. The memo arose from a need to distinguish between external and internal correspondence in an effort to make separate filing more efficient.

Traditional salutations and closings were dropped. More efficient form headings replaced

⁸ Ibid., 68-73.

⁹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰ Ibid., 77.

the letterhead used in external correspondence. Style also became less formal and was marked by an impersonal tone.¹¹

At the same time, new technology in writing and copying, such as the press copy book, transformed how information flowed and provided managers with greater ability to control and regulate the office workforce. These new approaches made communication increasingly immediate. The telegraph became the newest tool in the systematic management of businesses which spanned great distances, such as the railroad industry. The speed of the telegraph, initially used only for urgent communications, soon increased market transactions across distance and opened up new market possibilities. Eventually, railroads and other firms began using the telegraph for routine messages, a simple move which marked a significant cultural change.¹² Thomas Richards writes, “technologies like the railway, the steamship, the telegraph and the telephone made it possible for people to imagine knowing things not sequentially but simultaneously.”¹³ However, the emphasis in systematic management remained on written communication. Yates points out that the invention of the telephone in 1876 failed to replace written communication immediately since “the ideology of systematic management demanded increasing written communication to provide consistency, exactness, and documentation.”¹⁴ Business thus entered a new era of mass production and distribution of its internal documentation, reducing the time and expense incurred in creating and using documents. Yates states that

¹¹ Ibid., 96-97.

¹² Ibid., 22-23.

¹³ Richards, 5-6.

¹⁴ Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 22.

this indirectly led to the growth of centralized communication techniques concurrent with systematic management practices.¹⁵

For business offices, early technologies such as the typewriter and punch-card machine intensified clerical work and created more information by which managers made decisions.¹⁶ Within the office, typewriters were widely in use by American businesses in the 1880s and they became a standard feature in Canadian business after 1900. Typewriters increased the productivity of clerks in the creation of correspondence and other records as the speed of typing far exceeded handwriting. Moreover, typewriters enhanced the use of written communication as a managerial tool by separating the composition of documents from their production. Before the typewriter, managers often drafted correspondence themselves to be recopied by clerks, or might produce their own correspondence. With the advent of the typewriter, clerical staff became solely responsible for the physical production of written documents, while management did the composition work in the form of dictation.¹⁷ The clerical workforce also helped standardize the forms of new documentation that emerged from the typewriter and copying devices. As archivist Hugh Taylor states: "Like print, the machine's output was uniform, homogenous, so that personal letters too were robbed for a while of spontaneity; type requires correct form and spelling according to the iron law of the printing press."¹⁸

The invention of various copying devices also aided in managerial control through written communication. As the speed of business increased, there was a need for

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Lowe, 149. The introduction of employee punch-clocks in Canada in 1902 was also a step in the direction of controlling labour costs and worker productivity. Lowe, 145-146. For an examination of the punch-card as archival record, see Margaret O'Neill Adams, "Punch Card Records: Precursors of Electronic Records," *American Archivist* 58 (Spring 1995): 182-201.

¹⁷ Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 43.

¹⁸ Taylor, "'Act and Deed'," 465.

faster production of copies which were also more accurate. Devices such as press copy books produced exact facsimiles of documents which “saved both clerical labour, that needed to duplicate a document in manuscript once or several times, and intellectual labour, that needed to scrutinize each copy to ensure that it conformed to the original in every respect.”¹⁹ The press copy book was patented in 1780 by James Watt but was not widely used until the latter part of the nineteenth century as a replacement for hand-copying outward correspondence into bound copybooks. Yates describes the process of press copying:

...a screw-powered letter press was used in conjunction with a press book, a bound volume of blank, tissue paper pages. A letter freshly written in a special copying ink was placed under a dampened page while the rest of the pages were protected by oilcloths. The book was then closed and the mechanical press screwed down tightly.... The pressure and moisture caused an impression of the letter to be retained on the underside of the tissue sheet. This impression could then be read through the top of the thin paper.²⁰

Such press books served the same function as handwritten copybooks; both organized outgoing correspondence chronologically and were indexed alphabetically by letter recipient, indicating which pages contained correspondence to that person.²¹

Carbon paper and copying devices such as the rolling press copier replaced letter press books for their ease in reproducing multiple copies of unbound documents. The use of aniline dye and stencils in reproduction also facilitated mass production of documents, particularly for the distribution of rules, orders and announcements. These innovations were tied to the growing amount of internal written communication needed for the type of

¹⁹ Barbara Craig, “The Introduction of Copying Devices into the British Civil Service, 1877-1889,” in Barbara Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 111.

²⁰ Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 26-27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

control exercised by managers. Yates writes that they “spurred the evolution of the internal written communication system so integral to the systematic management movement.”²²

As the amount of paperwork expanded, filing systems grew to accommodate the deluge of documents. With carbon paper and other copying devices, loose copies of outgoing correspondence replaced copybooks. The advent of vertical filing systems created new storage classification systems. Press books only allowed chronological arrangement, whereas vertical filing opened the possibility of the arrangement of documents by various functions. It also facilitated more convenient access to documents since they could be removed from their files without moving papers that might have been piled on top of them.²³

Archivist Brian Hubner describes a similar evolution of filing systems as used by the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs (DIA). In the early-nineteenth century, the DIA used the “docket-letterbook” system, in which incoming letters were tied together chronologically into “dockets.” Indexes were created for later retrieval of correspondence. Outgoing letters were copied chronologically in indexed letterbooks. After Confederation and an explosion of paperwork, the “subject-file” system was used, in which incoming letters and drafts of outgoing letters were filed together chronologically in subject files. Later, in the early twentieth century, the “subject-block” system was used, in which functions that the department performed were filed in blocks. Within those blocks, subjects were filed using a numeric system, with further classification of sub-units of subjects. These changes in filing systems were necessary to

²² Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 45. See Craig for more details on types of duplicators in use by the British Civil Service, 1877-1889.

²³ Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 56-58.

accommodate growing government bureaucracy and the massive increase in paperwork that ensued.²⁴

For late-nineteenth century business, the evolution of new technologies and genres in written communication were all intertwined in the purpose of improved recordkeeping. According to the principles of systematic management, records were created for the mass communication of orders and rules in the downward flow of records, and for accountability and analysis in the upward flow. In order to ensure that managerial power was centralized, procedures and forms in records creation were standardized to homogenize data. Power was achieved through the control of communication, and predictability was the key to achieving this aim.

The records kept by the Commissioner's Office show that the HBC paid attention to new recordkeeping practices and incorporated them into its traditional methods of communication. The records are comprised mostly of correspondence, accounts, and reports and represent the downward and upward flow of records.²⁵ Their physical form also displays an increasing reliance on standardized forms, as well as the use of typewriters and copying devices. What is more, increased centralization not only demonstrates systematic management principles, but also hearkens back to the colonial roots of the Hudson's Bay Company. While the Commissioner's Office faced the task of operating a modern business on Canadian soil with increased autonomy from the

²⁴ Hubner, 65-84. For other examples of government recordkeeping in the late-nineteenth century, see Bill Russell, "The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860-1914," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85) and Terry Cook, "Legacy in Limbo: An Introduction to the Records of the Department of the Interior," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88).

²⁵ Lateral reporting will not be addressed in this paper as it is less evident than downward and upward reporting.

Governor and Committee in London, it did so by resorting to the company's tradition of meticulous recordkeeping in upward reporting, as will be discussed.

Use of New Information Technology and Recordkeeping Systems

The increase in records generated by and received at the Commissioner's Office was caused by a desire for greater control over the business and achieved by centralizing the flow of communication toward the office. This administrative shift was aided by new information technologies that increased the volume of documentation and sped up its production. These technologies aided in making documentation uniform and ensured that the same information was passed down to all levels of HBC administration. As Yates states, “[b]y reducing the time and expense involved in creating and using documents... the technological innovations... made feasible and economic – and thus indirectly encouraged – the rapid growth and effective use of systematic communication in management.”²⁶

Typewritten documents began to appear with regularity in the 1880s during Joseph Wrigley's time as commissioner. Beginning in 1889, outward correspondence was regularly written by typewriter.²⁷ The typewriter became essential in the production of standardized forms, duplicated through various methods such as stencil papers, mimeograph or aniline dye.²⁸

The use of various copying devices is evident in the records. From 1874 to 1899, outward correspondence was copied in press copy books, arranged chronologically.²⁹

²⁶ Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 21.

²⁷ HBCA, D.13/9, Outward letterbook – London, 1889-1890.

²⁸ Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 53-54.

²⁹ HBCA, D.13/1-20, Outward letterbooks – London, 1874-1889.

This saved a significant amount of time in copying from the days of hand-copying outward correspondence into letterbooks. Beginning in 1900, copies of outward correspondence were kept loose, indicating that other forms of copying were used, such as carbon paper or the rolling press copier.³⁰

The records that arrived at the Commissioner's Office were likely kept and filed by clerical staff. After 1891, accounts and personnel records of the fur trade and salesshops operations were handled by the Accountant's Department. The manner in which records were stored needed to adapt to the increasing volume of records coming into the office. The large amounts of loose accounting forms arriving in the office were, for the most part, filed in bound volumes. Others, such as district accounts from the department offices, were kept loose and filed by district and type of account.³¹ As outlined by Yates and Hubner, vertical filing systems became integral to storing incoming records and copies of outgoing records as copying technology increased the volume of loose documents. The records of the Commissioner's Office show evidence of this style of filing, although it is difficult to say whether the filing systems in the archives still maintain the original order of the records. Series of loose records may have been arranged by the archives soon after they entered its custody. However, their current arrangement suggests that there has been little tampering with most original ordering systems.

Inward correspondence from the Governor and Committee in London constitutes a large volume of incoming loose documentation. The letters are arranged chronologically and were originally bound on the sides into makeshift volumes. During

³⁰ HBCA, D.13/21-30, Outward letterbooks – London, 1900-1909. For more detail on these copying techniques, see Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 45-50.

³¹ HBCA, D.30, Accounts received from district headquarters, 1872-1900.

Chipman's term as commissioner, the volume of correspondence from the Governor and Committee increased dramatically. This was likely due to the increased use of copying devices and the typewriter. It is interesting to note how evidence of the type of recordkeeping system used by the Governor and Committee in London is present in these letters. The committee appears to have sent the Commissioner's Office copies of the original correspondence and each letter is numbered at the top for the committee's own recordkeeping purposes.³²

The Commissioner's Office inward correspondence also contains a large body of letters received from the officers of the various districts and posts.³³ These too are arranged chronologically. Unlike the letters received from the Governor and Committee, these have no evidence of having been bound, which suggests that some sort of vertical filing system was used. According to the archival finding aid for the Commissioner's Office records, C.C. Chipman introduced a new system of yearly subject files but these records have not survived. These letters were accompanied by accounts and reports which constitute the bulk of upward reporting, as discussed earlier.³⁴

Registers, synopses and indexes of inward and outward correspondence became important tools for keeping track of the great influx of correspondence. The outward correspondence books of correspondence sent to the Governor and Committee pay particular attention to indexing in order to organize the vast amount of correspondence sent. The registers, synopses and indexes also demonstrate how old methods of recordkeeping were overlaid with more sophisticated indexing tools. The inward and

³² HBCA, D.19, Inward correspondence from London office, 1874-1901.

³³ HBCA, D.20/1-69, Inward correspondence – general, 1874-1910.

³⁴ HBCA, Section D finding aid, Records of the Hudson's Bay Company's Commissioner's Office, description for D.20/1-69.

outward correspondence continued to be filed chronologically – a system used throughout the HBC's long history. The Commissioner's Office used more complex indexing systems, such as by subject, in order to compensate for the limits of chronological filing. Instead of using subject filing systems, as described by Hubner, the Commissioner's Office preferred to maintain its traditional methods while utilizing more modern indexing systems. For example, from 1874 to 1884, during James A. Grahame's time as commissioner, the outward correspondence books contained chronological indexes. In 1884, Joseph Wrigley introduced subject indexing into these volumes. Beginning in 1890, synopses of the letters began to appear.³⁵

Commissioner Grahame kept registers of inward and outward correspondence; these were arranged chronologically and contain information on the correspondent and date the letter was received or, in the case of outward correspondence, date of postage and method of delivery. Outward letters registered note any enclosures sent.³⁶

An outward register kept by Chipman, dated 1891, demonstrates the extent of information gathered for the sake of tracking records generated by and arriving at the Commissioner's Office. The register contains an index alphabetically listing the correspondent by name and indicates the page number within the register where the correspondent's documentation is identified. Within the register, the pages referred to in the index are on the dorse side of the page given in the index, headed by the district in which the correspondent was employed. On this page, all correspondence to the district is listed chronologically and gives the letter's subject. The page across is headed by the correspondent's name – usually the district officer – and lists the responses from the

³⁵ HBCA, D.13, Outward letterbooks – London, 1874-1909.

³⁶ HBCA, D.21/1-5, Registers of Commissioner's inward and outward correspondence, 1874-1884.

officer to the letters referred to on the district page. For example, under the correspondence to the Athabasca District, the letter dated June 26 is listed as "Letter to Mr. E.J. Lawrence – horseshooting." The opposite page lists William M. McKay as the officer in charge, and the person who responded to the Commissioner's Office's letter. His response is dated August 8 and the subject line reads: "Mr. Lawrence at fault."³⁷ This displays a high concern with keeping tabs on the influx of correspondence.

Beginning in Wrigley's time in office, separate subject indexes of inward and outward correspondence were kept which referred to the loose inward correspondence and outward correspondence books. The indexes are arranged alphabetically and are cross-referenced to numbered letters.³⁸ Synopses of inward and outward correspondence were kept by both Wrigley and Chipman. Each synopsis is cross referenced to a paragraph number of the letter in which the subject outlined in the synopsis is discussed. They are arranged chronologically.³⁹

Downward Flow of Records – Setting Rules and Regulations

HBC administrators were fond of issuing rules and regulations on business transactions and the conduct of officers and servants; such records serve as prime examples of efforts to control exercised through downward communication. An important aspect of the HBC's regulation of business transactions were rules set for recordkeeping that attempted to ensure consistency and completeness in information gathering. In 1683, the Governor and Committee first directed the overseas factors to

³⁷ HBCA, D.21/11, Register of Commissioner's outward correspondence -- Hudson's Bay Company official and general, 2 June – 3 Nov. 1891.

³⁸ HBCA, D.22, Indexes to Commissioner's inward and outward correspondence, 1884-1901.

³⁹ HBCA, D.21/6-10, Synopses of Commissioner's inward and outward correspondence, 1887-1902.

keep daily journals of the occurrences at the posts and to send these to London with the yearly fur returns. The masters of ships travelling between London and Rupert's Land were also ordered to keep journals of their voyages.⁴⁰

A volume of standing rules and regulations of fur trade operations, kept by Commissioner James A. Grahame, illustrates the high accord given to standardization. The book was created in 1874 and contains all standing rules and regulations set down between 1843 and 1874. Grahame made additional revisions in 1877. The rules concern the flow of records, recordkeeping methods, the administration of company servants, prices of furs, and the transfer of furs and supplies. A further section entitled "Regulations for promoting Moral and Religious Improvement" gives rules on church attendance by servants, employment of women and the education of children at the post. From 1843, we see a number of rules pertaining to the proper and thorough documentation of business transactions. For example, Rule 27 states that officers in charge of districts are to submit to their departmental headquarters annual accounts, journals, copies of all correspondence and a report "conveying every requisite information in regard to the state and mode of conducting the trade." This includes an abstract of all Aboriginal hunters trading with the various posts and a census of all connected to the posts.⁴¹

Correspondence remained an effective means of communicating these rules. According to Yates, the purpose of downward written communication was to ensure that directions were not miscommunicated, as well as to make clear the lines of authority. The Commissioner's Office adopted the memoranda and circular letter as a means of

⁴⁰ Simmons, 71.

⁴¹ HBCA, D.24/1, Standing rules and regulations, 1843-1877.

downward communication during James A. Grahame's tenure as commissioner, presumably to communicate changes to rules and regulations between issuances of rule books.⁴² Outward letterbooks and volumes of copies of memoranda and circulars were kept at the Commissioner's Office. They contain correspondence addressed to various officers within the departments and concern the general operations of the company. This includes such issues as accounts, fur packing, freight and servants' engagements. Some extracts of minutes of council from departmental meetings are also present.⁴³

Memoranda were also used to convey rules for recordkeeping, in particular, instructions on the proper methods for filling out standardized account forms. For example, on 15 December 1885, Trade Commissioner Wrigley issued a "Memorandum Regarding Forms for Commissioner's Office." He addresses specific accounts and the information they should contain.⁴⁴ A more detailed example of rules for recordkeeping can be found in an undated memorandum entitled "Memorandum for Guidance in Keeping the Accounts of a Fur Trade Post." Detailed instructions in filling out day books, cash books and others demonstrate the level of accounting work that was required from post and district masters.⁴⁵

Rules and regulations were also communicated by the Commissioner's Office in the form of published rule books, two of which can be found among the records of the Commissioner's Office. The first is dated 1887 and demonstrates Joseph Wrigley's increasing drive towards standardization in communication and the practices of the officers. Wrigley, in a letter to London secretary David Armit, states that he "spent much

⁴² Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 68.

⁴³ HBCA, D.14, Outward letterbooks to Hudson's Bay Company officials, 1874-1892; D.23, Memoranda and circulars, 1875-1910.

⁴⁴ HBCA, D.26/1 fo. 37, "Memorandum Regarding Forms for Commissioner's Office," 15 Dec. 1885.

⁴⁵ HBCA, D.26/1 fo. 123, "Memorandum for Guidance in Keeping the Accounts of a Fur Trade Post," n.d.

time during the last two or three months obtaining information and endeavouring to adapt old rules to altered circumstances."⁴⁶ Of the rules compiled by James A. Grahame in 1874, Wrigley writes:

The late 'Rules and Regulations' appear to be to a considerable extent obsolete, little known and constantly disregarded. I propose, however, when the new 'Rules and Regulations' are duly settled and authorized, to insist on their being rigidly kept.⁴⁷

The rules compiled in 1887 deal with all aspects of the fur trade and are geared toward district officers. Strikingly, a great number of rules deal explicitly with recordkeeping and the flow of records within the fur trade hierarchy. In Rule 42, postmasters are requested to make annual reports to district managers. The following rule instructs district managers to send an annual report to the Commissioner's Office embodying the reports of all postmasters within the district and to also include any suggestions for improvements to the district trade. Rule 87 lists all the accounts that a district officer was required to forward to the departmental office at the close of each outfit year: inventory book, transfer book, servants' book debts, statement of servants' wages, recapitulation of returns, abstract of disposal of returns, comparative statement of gratuities to Indians, account of expenses and temporary assistance, balance sheets of posts and a balance sheet of the district.⁴⁸ Rule 88 contains a list of records to be forwarded by the departments to the Commissioner's Office each outfit year. It represents the accounts to be received from the district offices: balance sheets of the posts and districts, comparative statements of returns, list of unsaleable articles, report on district trade by the officer in charge, comparative statement of Indian debt, statement of

⁴⁶ HBCA, A.12/28 fo. 294, Joseph Wrigley to David Armit, 3 February 1887.

⁴⁷ HBCA, A.12/28 fo. 295, Wrigley to Armit, 3 February 1887.

⁴⁸ HBCA, D.24/9, "Hudson's Bay Company. Rules and Regulation. Subject to the Provisions of the Deed Poll." 1887.

gratuities to Indians and confidential report by the officer in charge on the clerks and postmasters.⁴⁹

A memorandum regarding this rule book, dated 12 December 1887, demonstrates the great extent to which the Commissioner's Office was using standardized forms in its accounting procedures. The various forms are listed by number and indicate the rule to which they apply. For example, for form no. 2, which applies to Rule 30, the memorandum states that it is “[t]o be made in duplicate for all monthly and weekly servants. One copy to be given the servant and one kept at the District office or post where the servant is employed.”⁵⁰

The 1887 rule book demonstrates Wrigley's drive for direct central control. For instance, Rule 45 stipulates that district officers cannot have direct communication with other districts or with the Governor and Committee in London; all communications must first go through the Commissioner's Office. The same principle applies to official communications outside the HBC such as with government officials (Rule 50). Moreover, servants who wished to communicate with the Commissioner's Office needed to do so through their district officer (Rule 51).⁵¹

The second published rule book, “Rules and Regulations for the Management of Salesshops,” is dated 1896. This book demonstrates the degree to which forms were being used by the HBC thanks to C.C. Chipman's initiative to standardize communication. Forms are listed by number and specify which were to be sent weekly, monthly, quarterly or annually.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² HBCA, D.24.9, “Rules and Regulations for the Management of Salesshops,” 1896.

These records, which moved from the Commissioner's Office down to the ranks of district and post managers, demonstrate how Commissioners Wrigley and Chipman espoused systematic management principles of consistency and standardization in recordkeeping. The challenge of managing the fur trade across the vast Canadian northwest meant that accounting and reporting procedures needed to be carefully laid out in writing to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Rule books and downward correspondence made clear that the commissioners aimed to exercise complete central control over all HBC North American operations.

Upward Flow of Records – Centralization and Standardization

The central tenet of systematic management, according to Yates, was “the need to transcend reliance on the individual in favour of dependence on system.”⁵³ In the HBC, the chief commissioners increasingly implemented regulations on recordkeeping which focussed on standardization and compliance to form. Post and district managers found themselves with decreased autonomy and were subject to stringent rules and regulations on recordkeeping. The records which arrived at the Commissioner's Office demonstrate the level of standardization and the district and post officers' adherence to recordkeeping rules in the name of centralized control.

The HBC had always tried to exercise close control over its business records. The vast territory in which its business took place necessitated meticulous and detailed accounts in order to maintain its hold on the fur trade business. In the era before the telegraph, the time lapse between correspondence received and answered was tediously

⁵³ Yates, *Control Through Communication*, 11.

long. During George Simpson's governorship, orders and correspondence received in Lachine took months to reach the interior, causing great delays in decision-making.⁵⁴

A result of governing from a distance, private trade among servants proved to be one of the biggest threats to the HBC's desire for monopoly control of the fur trade. Carlos and Nicholas state that servants and officers were able to indulge in private trade in situations where the exchange of information was unequal. Since the officers knew more about conditions in Rupert's Land, the accounting of the outputs of the fur trade could not be linked conclusively to the inputs of managers. In other words, it was easy for HBC officers to trade more furs than were accounted for in the yearly fur returns sent to London. This was a problem universally faced by early chartered companies.⁵⁵ The way to curb illicit behaviour among the overseas managers was through meticulous watch over recordkeeping through regulations. Account books, post journals and correspondence all had strict standards governing the way they were kept.

Correspondence was the major form of communication between the Governor and Committee and their overseas posts. It also served as the means to monitor the actions of company officers and servants. The early posts along Hudson Bay received an annual letter which contained instructions, questions and comments, often concerning the submitted account book. The letter also contained trade regulations and employee information such as wages and contracts. In response to these letters, the factors at each post were required to respond in a standard manner, by writing in paragraphs that coincided with the paragraphs of the letter received from London and were enclosed with the annual journal as well as bill of lading, invoice and indent. Thus, the annual

⁵⁴ Galbraith, 18-19.

⁵⁵ Carlos and Nicholas, 857.

correspondence, together with the account book and actual quantities of furs received in London, gave the Governor and Committee control over their managers and private trade.⁵⁶

The HBC's early accounting methods also demonstrated close control over recordkeeping. Double-entry bookkeeping had been used by the company since the mid-eighteenth century, evident in the grand journal and grand ledger, kept by the Governor and Committee in London. The grand journal was a tool used to summarize chronologically and categorize monthly transactions to prepare them for entry in the grand ledger. Its purpose was "to systemize the HBC's record keeping, reorganizing and classifying information from day books into suitable categories that reflected important aspects of the Company's operations."⁵⁷ The grand ledgers are comprised of "a series of interlocking, individual ledgers – or statement of assets and liabilities – for particular goods, merchants, or commodities."⁵⁸

The general account book was the main way of keeping track of the overseas business. It contained a record of furs obtained, goods traded and provisions kept at posts. Still, early bookkeeping practices, according to Hugh Grant, were hit-or-miss, with haphazard entries that made it difficult to determine profitability or the source of expenditures. This presented a problem, since "shareholders needed to know the annual profit was being handled by management, either as retained earnings, reinvested, or paid

⁵⁶ Ibid., 869-870.

⁵⁷ Hugh Grant, "Bookkeeping in the Eighteenth Century: The Grand Journal and Grand Ledger of the Hudson's Bay Company," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 148.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 148.

out as dividends; they also needed assurance that annual dividends were being paid out of profit and not through a diminution of the capital stock.”⁵⁹

The development of a “standard” of trade instituted a means “to help mesh markets separated by long distance in an era of pre-modern transport and communication.”⁶⁰ It also was a means of preventing private trade among the HBC officers by giving exact values to all furs and trade goods. Three standards were established. The first was the Official Standard, which set the unit of account for all trade goods at the price of one male beaver skin, or “made beaver.” The second was the Comparative Standard, by which all other types of furs received were assigned made beaver values.

By setting the price at which officers were to trade, the Governor and Committee found an easy means to compare the volume of furs received with the volume of trade goods sent overseas. While the practice took the step to eliminate private trade, the downside was that managers lost control over discretionary trade practices, such as ceremonial gift-giving to Aboriginal hunters. As a result, the Factor’s or Double Standard was created, which allowed factors to depart from official prices in order to maintain this relationship of trade and gift-giving. This reduced the control that the Governor and Committee had over its inventory. Thus clerks and managers had to keep close inventory of trade goods and furs at the end of each trading period.⁶¹

In the era of the Commissioner's Office, the adoption of systematic management practices and technological advances made the flow of upward communication more effective for centralized control. After the abandonment of the geographical fur trade

⁵⁹ Ibid., 146.

⁶⁰ Taylor and Baskerville, 45.

⁶¹ Carlos and Nicholas, 867-869.

departments (Northern, Southern, Montreal and Western) in 1892 in favour of central control at the Commissioner's Office, Chipman recognized that even more control over accounting procedures could take place within his office in Winnipeg. For example, in his 1892 report to the Governor and Committee, Chipman called for greater regulatory control over capital in his office:

Now that the concentration at Winnipeg of all the Accounts has been completed, and all Cash Drafts, and Requisitions for goods on London, are made through the Commissioner's Office, it will doubtless be possible to have such information as will enable control to be made of the Capital employed.⁶²

As was mentioned in chapter two, Wrigley and Chipman instituted the use of standardized forms for accounts information. This represents the most substantial technological innovation used by the Commissioner's Office. Standardized forms, duplicated quickly with the technology of copying devices, greatly increased the volume of accounting records kept by the office. Mechanically copied forms replaced concise hand-copied account books such as the grand ledger and grand journal.

A good portion of the Commissioner's Office records are accounts submitted by the district and departmental offices on standard forms. Most forms were used throughout each fur trade district. The forms were typed, with department, district and relevant account information filled in by hand by the district managers.⁶³ The accounts demonstrate the flow of communication from district to department headquarters to the Commissioner's Office. For example, a series of Northern Department district accounts contain various accounts submitted by district managers to the Northern Department

⁶² HBCA, D.26/2, Commissioner Chipman's report on Hudson's Bay Company administration, August 1892.

⁶³ For example, HBCA, D.27/4, Allocation of furs with prices realized, Outfit 1888. This series contains typed and printed forms in which the district manager filled in his district and provided prices for various types of furs indicated on the form.

office. These accounts include comparative statements, fur returns, balance sheets, cash accounts, inventories and indents. This account information was then compiled by the Northern Department office and submitted to the Commissioner's Office.⁶⁴

Other accounts provide detailed information on the fur trade posts themselves. A series of balance sheets dated 1885-1892 also list all posts in the districts. The location of each post is provided, along with its distance from nearby posts, transportation access (for example, snow shoe, dog train, York boat or steamer) and the nature of the trade taking place.⁶⁵ This demonstrates the extent of control needed by the Commissioner's Office in order to make the fur trade viable over such a large area of land.

Besides accounts, annual reports on the business and conditions of the fur trade posts kept the Commissioner's Office in touch with the far corners of the HBC's Canadian business. Like their imperial counterparts across the British Empire, the HBC desired to amass as much information as possible from its vast ventures in order to keep control of its operations.

Before the creation of the Commissioner's Office in 1870, a system of regular fur trade post reports had been in place. Postmasters and district managers submitted annual reports to the department headquarters at either York Factory, Moose Factory, Montreal or Victoria. The reports detailed the state of the fur trade, conditions of the posts and outposts, and commented on the servants, officers and Aboriginal people attached to the posts, as well as the Canadians and free traders in the vicinity. The reports also provided great detail about the geography and topography of the district, its navigable waters and what country provisions were available to the posts.

⁶⁴ See, for example, D.29/1, Northern Department accounts – statements of trade and other papers, 1873-1892; and D.30/1-17, Northern Department – district accounts, 1872-1891.

⁶⁵ HBCA, D.32/2-3, Districts and posts – descriptions and abstracts of balance sheets, 1885-1892.

Under the third Deed Poll of 1871, the position of inspecting chief factor was created. The company appointed four inspecting chief factors who outranked the eight chief factors and were charged with the inspection and superintendence of particular districts.⁶⁶ They reported their findings to the Commissioner's Office based on information gathered from inspection trips and reports made by district managers. At the same time, post and district managers continued their system of annual reporting.

The inspecting chief factors presented their district reports in the form of correspondence with the Commissioner's Office and reported in the same manner as the post and district managers – on trade, geography and people.⁶⁷ This reporting system was overhauled by Trade Commissioner Joseph Wrigley in 1886. As was mentioned in chapter two, Wrigley reorganized the flow of communication between posts, districts and the Commissioner's Office in order to make the HBC's trade system more profitable. The HBC consistently suffered losses along rail and steamboat lines, as well as wagon roads which now wove through the former Rupert's Land and brought goods and provisions from other sources to the new settlement communities.⁶⁸ Greater control over trading districts was desired to curb these patterns of losses. The implementation of inspection reports enabled more consistent reporting on the business of posts to the Commissioner's Office.

Wrigley introduced a new system of annual inspection carried out by the new class of inspecting officers between 1886 and 1894. The reports produced by these officers demonstrate again Wrigley's desire for standardized reporting processes. They

⁶⁶ HBCA, memo from Gower, 7.

⁶⁷ HBCA, D.25/19-21, Inspecting Chief Factor William J. Christie's correspondence books, 1872-1873; and D.25/22-23, Inspecting Chief Factor George S. McTavish's correspondence books, 1875-1880.

⁶⁸ Ray, 74.

follow a strict scheme and remain uniform in appearance and in the nature of their content. The officers filled out standard forms by hand which consisted of blank forms with printed headings at the top. The submitted reports were kept at the Commissioner's Office in yearly volumes, organized by district. Typed press copies of the reports were kept by the posts. The reports were comprised of eight sections: A. Buildings; B. Stock; C. Furs; D. Accounts; E. Expenses; F. Personal (i.e., Personnel); G. General; and H. Suggestions. Each section contained numbered sub-sections that needed to be commented on in the specific order given by the scheme for inspection. The inspecting officer filled out the form with the appropriate numbered responses, with the numbers corresponding to the questions laid out in the inspection report scheme. For example, under the 1886 scheme of inspection, the heading "A. Buildings" required the officers to comment on: 1. Condition; 2. Situation [location]; and 3. Suitability.⁶⁹

By 1889, the scheme for inspection had been modified. Most notably, under the heading "Buildings," the first sub-section now required inspecting officers to provide a sketch ground plan of the posts' buildings.⁷⁰ The plans display the layout of the buildings usually in relation to a physical landmark such as a river or lake, with the conditions of the buildings subsequently described in the report. In 1890, photographs became a part of some of E.K. Beeston's Lac la Pluie District post inspection reports. The photos depict the buildings at the posts of Wabigoon, Savanne, Lac Seul and Fort Frances and give a visual image of the buildings described in the reports.⁷¹

⁶⁹ HBCA, D.25/1, Post inspection reports for Cumberland and Lac la Pluie Districts, 1886.

⁷⁰ HBCA, D.25/18, Scheme for inspection of posts, n.d.

⁷¹ HBCA, D.25/10, Post inspection reports for English River, Edmonton, Fort MacLeod and Lac la Pluie Districts, 1890. This type of record analysis – examination of an individual document and its particular categories of information – employs diplomats' methods espoused by the Reverend Leonard Boyle and Luciana Duranti, as discussed in chapter one.

With the plans and photographs we find the intersection of systematic management principles with the sensibilities adhered to by former imperial powers. James Ryan posits that “the British Empire was constructed in the Victorian imagination through a variety of cultural texts” and that colonial photography was obsessed with geography.⁷² Here, too we can view the Commissioner's Office records as an aspect of what Thomas Richards calls the effort to “[hold] together the vast and various parts of the Empire.”

The post inspection reports also tell us something of the declining status of the post and district officers under the new reporting system. There were usually only two inspecting officers conducting inspection reports in all the fur trade districts.⁷³ By entrusting the inspection of all Canadian fur trade operations to a few inspecting officers, the Commissioner's Office was able to ensure consistency in and centralization of reporting since the responsibility of reporting was given to men who had a direct link to the central controlling office. Prior to the inspection system, the post and district officers submitted reports and, now, were denied this task.

More evidence of the declining status of officers lies within the inspection reports themselves. Under the heading “Personal,” the inspecting officers were to “report upon all attached to the Post, especially their business capability, suitability and personal character.”⁷⁴ In the 1886 report on Rapid River post in the Cumberland District, Inspecting Officer E.K. Beeston writes of John McAulay, junior chief trader in charge of the post:

⁷² Ryan, 20-24.

⁷³ These were J. McDougall, E.K. Beeston, P. McKenzie and, before 1890, W.H. Adams.

⁷⁴ HBCA, D.25/18, Scheme for inspection of posts, n.d.

...about 30 years in service, married, 10 Children, does not appear to be a good Indian Trader, inactive and somewhat unpopular. Honest and faithful to the interests of the Company according to his abilities but loquacious. Speaks Cree and French. Understands accounts but does not devote attention to them.⁷⁵

As shown in this example, the old guard of company men were becoming undermined by a different rank of officer, hired for their modern business acumen. Modern business practices were displacing traditional roles.

Conclusion

In the HBC's new role as a foreign business in a new country, it found itself on the cusp of new business methods which were taking shape in North American business. As the company vested more centralized control in its Canadian head office, it embraced recordkeeping principles consistent with those of the systematic management movement. The Commissioner's Office became the company's hub of information flow within Canada in order to keep close control over its complex and widespread business. The Commissioner's Office supplied explicit rules and regulations on the operations of the company down to the lower levels of the fur trade. In return, the officers at the district and post level were expected to provide the office with meticulous accounts of all business transactions. New information technologies such as copying devices and typewriters made the production of huge amounts of records even easier.

For the HBC, this type of centralized control was nothing new, as, by 1870, it had two centuries of careful bookkeeping behind it. The impulse to keep close control over its former colonial interest remained the same. What changed in this new era was the drive

⁷⁵ HBCA, D.25/1, Rapid River Post report, Post inspection reports for Cumberland and Lac la Pluie Districts, 1886.

towards modernization and the desire to remain a viable business in an ever-changing business world.

Conclusion

Contextual Analysis in Archival Practice: The Keystone Project at the Archives of Manitoba

The contextual analysis of archival records adds texture and depth to archival work. As discussed in chapter one, the principle of provenance, coupled with interest over the past decades in the importance of contextual information, has impelled the archivist to undertake historical research as part of her daily work. By exploring the context of creation of the records of the Commissioner's Office, we have developed a fuller understanding of why and how these records were created, and by placing these records within the social and business milieu of the late nineteenth century, we have seen how societal and administrative contexts have influenced the recordkeeping context and thus shaped form and content. Through this exploration, the archivist has taken part in the creation of the records by imposing her own interpretation of historical events and the causes and effects that ensued. As Terry Cook states, "the archive is now seen increasingly as the site where social memory has been (and is) constructed."¹ How, then, can contextual analysis be transformed into archival practice?

The Archives of Manitoba is currently engaged in a significant redescription project of its records. The Keystone Project, as it is known, has been designed to create a descriptive database of the archival holdings of the entire institution, including the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, which will be available on the web. The project seeks to make the archives more accessible and searchable than its current paper-based finding aid system. Moreover, the database will act as a tool of control for the institution over its

¹ Cook, "Postmodernism," 27.

records, as aspects of archival work such as description, arrangement, acquisition and reference become accessible to archives staff through one medium.

Keystone is modeled after the descriptive database created by the Archives of Ontario (AO). The AO's project was innovative in Canadian archival work because it abandoned the concept of the fonds in arrangement and description of its government records in favour of using the series system model developed by the National Archives of Australia. The concept of the fonds was found to pose theoretical and practical problems for government records in particular. According to conventional archival thinking, a fonds constitutes all the documents created by one creator; the context of a record's creation then becomes pivotal to arrangement and description. However, problems arise in defining a fonds when faced with the constant restructuring that takes place in institutions. For example, as the functions and structures of government institutions change, series (or individual recordkeeping or filing systems) may acquire two or more creators. A given series may have been initially created by a particular agency, which may have reported to one or more other entities in the administrative hierarchy. All the entities in the hierarchy may well be considered the 'creator' of the series; to pick one as *the* creator of *all* the series (in order to make a fonds) distorts provenance and the history of these records. When administrative change occurs a given series may be transferred to the control of other entities and become enmeshed in new hierarchies, and this may occur several times over the course of its history. Each one will add records to the series. Which entity, then, is the series' sole creator? The Australians argued convincingly that the approach that comes closer to applying provenance involves linking each series to its various contributing creators, so that series can be linked to all of their creators and the

series of all creators can be identified. Archivist Bob Krawczyk, a key figure in the design of the AO's descriptive system, articulates these problems:

While it is possible in theory to distinguish, at any one time, mutually exclusive 'fonds-creating bodies' within large government administration, such definitions become dangerously arbitrary when they are applied to records created in the course of administrative change over time and in hierarchies. The fonds-based approach to arrangement, when it is applied to large government organizations, will inevitably and necessarily run up against contradictions between the definitions of fonds and the complexities of the fonds-creating bodies. The result is that the intent behind the concept, to demonstrate the provenance of the records through their arrangement, is seriously compromised.²

Furthermore, the viability of the fonds is called into question when records of a particular creator are scattered throughout many different archival repositories. As described in chapter one, archivist Laura Millar demonstrates the flaws in the fonds concept with the example of the twenty separate archival repositories which claim to hold "Hudson's Bay Company fonds." Millar calls for the virtual incorporation of these separate fonds into the main body of Hudson's Bay Company records at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg:

The records would find a place in the existing arrangement for that fonds, as a series or subseries, a file, or an item. By physically or virtually incorporating these fragments of records into the larger Hudson's Bay Company fonds, archivists could recreate an original order based on the functions and activities of the creating agency.³

Similarly, the AO created "a system for capturing and demonstrating as accurately as possible the multiple creators who contribute to a particular series over time and in hierarchies, and for providing information about the creators that sets the context for

² Bob Krawczyk, "Cross Reference Heaven: The Abandonment of the Fonds as the Primary Level of Arrangement for Ontario Government Records," *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999): 133.

³ Millar, 6.

understanding their records.”⁴ This was achieved by replacing the fonds with authority records, which provide contextual information about the records’ creators. Authority records are kept separate from record series descriptions. Authority records and series descriptions are linked together, in that, through the descriptive database, the information about the creating authority of a particular series is connected to the series. If the series has more than one creating authority, the database easily allows for the information of all creating authorities to be linked to the series and indicates the dates of the records for which each authority is responsible.⁵ By using series-level descriptions, archivists can solve the problem of fonds as posed by Millar. As she suggests: “Rather than pretend we have the fonds, archivists should explain what we have in hand, explain its temporal and spatial history, and let users create the linkages and so establish their own definition of the ‘whole.’”⁶

The Keystone database also allows the user to identify the component entities in the hierarchies of organizations, as well as to determine the predecessor and successor agencies of an agency or entity of particular interest. Linkages are made between a particular level of an organization and its controlling entity, as well as with those bodies that are subordinate to it, called controlled entities. In this way, the administrative history of an authority record can be shown in great depth, as the layers of hierarchy are readily traceable.⁷

At the Archives of Manitoba, the Keystone project is being undertaken by all three responsibility centres – Government and Private Records, and the Hudson's Bay

⁴ Krawczyk, 145.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 145-148.

⁶ Millar, 11.

⁷ Krawczyk, 147.

Company Archives. For the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, this new system is particularly helpful in tracing the various levels of business organization that made up the company. The move towards an online database allows archivists to demonstrate the complexities of HBC administration in ways that former classification schemes and paper-based finding aids could not. The bulk of classification and arrangement of the HBCA's records took place in the 1930s in London. In 1933, on the advice of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the pre-1870 records were divided into sections. For example, Section A was designated as the London office records and Section B as the records of the fur trade posts.⁸ Within Section B, each post for which the archives has records was assigned a number. York Factory, for example, was designated as B.239. All records created at or kept by York Factory were thus attributed to York Factory as their creating entity. All annual reports from York Factory were called York Factory reports. This does not take into consideration York Factory's function as the headquarters of both the York Factory District and, more significantly, the headquarters of the Northern Department. Therefore, the old system did not acknowledge that, within the body of records known as "York Factory reports" or B.239/e, some of the reports were created by the York Factory District or by the Northern Department. Moreover, the system did not allow for making distinctions in the descriptions of individual reports, such as the difference between copies of inspection reports from the 1880s written by inspecting officers and early district reports written by district officers. By using the Keystone database, however, proper provenance can be attributed to the series by assigning all the pertinent authority records to the series. In turn, the new database demonstrates the complexities of functions

⁸ HBCA, RG20/2/19, "Classification of H.B.C. Records," R. Levenson Gower, 10 March 1933.

which York Factory performed and provides the user with a richer understanding of the HBC's history.

Redescription of the Commissioner's Office records

Contextual exploration of the Commissioner's Office has aided significantly in the redescription of the office's records, known as Section D. Under the 1930s classification scheme, Section D was entitled "Special Section of Records" and was "to consist of records of the Hudson's Bay Company which cannot properly be allocated to Section B," including "Records, Correspondence etc. of Administrators in North America – e.g. of Sir George Simpson and of other Governors in Chief of Rupert's Land. After 1870 it will probably be found advisable to include the Records of the Company's Commissioners in this section...."⁹

Section D came to be known as the "Records of the Hudson's Bay Company's Commissioner's Office." This is a misnomer in that the section also encompasses records created beyond the scope of the Commissioner's Office, including pre-1870 records of the governors of Rupert's Land, among them a substantial body of records kept by Governor George Simpson between 1826 and 1860. Also found in Section D are records of the Canadian Sub-Committee, which operated independently of the Commissioner's Office, as well as records kept at the Winnipeg head office after 1910, when the functions of the Commissioner's Office were split into the Fur Trade, Salesshop and Lane Departments. The provenance of the records of Section D is therefore much more complex than the section's name suggests.

⁹ Ibid.

The Keystone database allows for the assignment of the proper creating bodies to Section D records. To date, authorities have been created for the Office of the Governor of Rupert's Land, the Commissioner's Office, the Canadian Sub-Committee and the Accountant's Department. These authority records provide key contextual information on the different bodies of North American administration which fall under Section D.

Administrative histories within the authority records provide the historical background for the organizational body. Within the Commissioner's Office authority, the controlling and controlled entities fields name the levels of HBC administration which fell under the control of the Commissioner's Office. For example, the Northern, Southern, Western and Montreal Departments appear as controlled entities from 1871 to 1892. This information not only links the departments' histories to that of the Commissioner's Office but also lets the database user know that a significant administrative shift took place in 1892 when the departments were dissolved. The predecessor entity link to the Office of the Governor of Rupert's Land demonstrates the major shift in North American administration that took place in 1871; it provides the user with the administrative contextual knowledge that the traditional governorship was replaced by a modernized office structure in the Commissioner's Office. Similarly, successor entity links to the Fur Trade, Salesshop and Land Departments indicate that another major administrative shift that took place in 1910 through the decentralization of Winnipeg head office operations. Authority records also provide the names of key people involved in each body.

In descriptions, Keystone allows record series, once split by constrictive classification definitions, to be reunited as whole series. For example, there are some record series that span beyond the dissolution of the Commissioner's Office in 1910. A

series of main cash books, for instance, contains 30 volumes that were kept by the Accountant's Department of the Commissioner's Office. The Accountant's Department continued to function past 1910, acting as the accounting body for the three commissioners who operated out of the Winnipeg head office. It existed until 1925, when the Canadian Committee, the new executive body in Canada, assumed the accounting functions in Winnipeg. Six volumes in the main cash book series are attributed to the Canadian Committee. Thus the series has two creating entities: the Accountant's Department, for the years 1895-1925, and the Canadian Committee, 1925-1937. Under the old classification system, the post-1925 records were placed with the records of the Canadian Committee, or RG2 (Record Group 2).¹⁰ Through redescription, these provenancial gaps can be filled and series can be properly described without the hindrances of former classification systems.

These examples from the work undertaken in the Keystone Project offer a glimpse into what is possible through contextual work in the archives. Archival documents need to be understood in relation to their origins; they are not created in a historical vacuum. The societal and administrative backgrounds are infused within the recordkeeping context of the Commissioner's Office and deeply influence the creation of individual records. By applying what is gleaned from contextual analysis to archival practice, the archivist embeds her own subjective interpretation of events into the records. The contextual interpretation of records is open-ended and changes with the passage of time. How does our globalized society impose itself onto colonial records such as those of the Commissioner's Office? What does our current information and technological revolution have to say about the one taking place at the end of the nineteenth century? Questions

¹⁰ HBCA, D.35, Main Cash Books, 1895-1925; and RG2/46/1-6, Main Cash Books, 1925-1937.

such as these infuse themselves into archival work. Archivists are not merely passive gatekeepers of records. They must recognize their active role in the construction of social memory, and must thoughtfully and responsibly take on that role by looking first to the past.

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- D.26 Miscellaneous office papers, 1857-1913
- D.27 Fur trade papers and accounts, 1874-1891
- D.29 Accounts from the headquarters of the Northern, Southern, Montreal and Western Departments, 1871-1900
- D.30 Accounts received from district headquarters, 1872-1900
- D.31 District and post balance sheets and trading accounts current, 1886-1915
- D.32 Account abstracts, results of trade and comparative statements of fur trade districts and saleshops, 1881-1905
- D.33/1-9 Abstracts of servants' accounts, 1892-1910
- D.34 District statements, 1892-1900
- D.40/1-18 Salesshop balance sheets and trading accounts, 1892-1910
- D.41/1-7 Salesshop reports, 1901-1910

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