

Reclaiming the people's memory

POSSIBILITIES AND FAILINGS

Knowing our democratic selves, our democratic possibilities, and most crucially our democratic failings steers us toward greater freedom and justice in Canada and beyond. With these thoughts in mind, I offer a personal reflection on the erosion of the people's memory at Library and Archives Canada under the government of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper.



Through locked doors at the east side exhibition room.

When I began new research on democratic governance in 2001, 395 Wellington Street *was* the National Archives Canada and the National Library of Canada. It had remained as such when the latter two merged into Library and Archives Canada in 2004. Large auditoriums at the street-level housed exhibitions and public talks, allowing visitors to reflect upon different fragments of Canada's past. On the fifth floor, there was a small café overlooking the Ottawa River. On the flagship research levels, sandwiched between the café and the downstairs exhibits, one would find numerous gifted librarians, archivists, and staff. With their assistance I gained access to materials impossible to find on my own. Down the road, I visited again and again. From across the planet, researchers took heavy advantage of the interlibrary loan program to access publications and micro-filmed records. I did too. We were all part of a global democratic experience at the heart of which was *Canada's* national memory.

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AN INSTITUTION'S METAMORPHOSIS

I was not prepared for 395 Wellington's metamorphosis when I returned in the spring of 2015, after several years away. Parts of the second floor, formerly alight with activity, stood eerily dark and silent. During the now *much* shorter time frames when it appears, a skeletal staff triages visitors toward or away from archivist consultations—mostly away, as far as I could tell. Evidently as a matter of policy, in the first instance, the staff directs researchers toward the computers, even though it is easy to see that Library and Archive Canada's digital interface is a cumbersome and often useless creature. In any event, there is no substance to the as-much-as-possible-full-digitization-dream for the near future or ever. In 2014, the auditor general released a scathing report. It illustrated the weaknesses of the digital system, the incompleteness of finding aids, and the languishing of uncollected and unprocessed records (Auditor General of Canada 2014).

The café had been shut down, presumably hovering hollow above visitors who before had brought it to life. Public Works and Government Services Canada now controls the main floor. The exhibition rooms stand as empty,



Site of 2007 World Book Day exhibit.

solemn places, shells of a lost past. Often cash-strapped community organizations used to convene events free of charge in some of these spaces, but no more (Public Works and Government Services Canada 2015). In 2007, a World Book Day exhibit was held in what is now a sterile and dead room with fully stocked junk food machines. Today, only a small strip of the foyer holds archival installations. At the entry level of 395 Wellington, a prohibition on Library and Archives Canada signage is apparently in place. An old notice in the coatroom remains. It prophetically cautions patrons that the national archives will not be held responsible for valuables left behind.



Inside the west side exhibition room.

A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

Despite vague claims of modest investments during this election year, cuts at Library and Archives Canada have had a devastating and possibly irreversible impact. Harper's ministers of Canadian heritage and official languages oversaw much of these rollbacks, especially

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James Moore (2008–2013) and Shelly Glover (2013–present). Some of the most shocking changes have happened since 2012. Library and Archives Canada's budget (already under pressure) was slashed by millions, leaving it in 2014 with a budget of just 58 percent of 1990–91 levels (adjusted for inflation). Its archival and library staff complement was lacerated. Two hundred and fifteen positions were made history, including 21 of 61 archivists and their assistants, as well as *half the digitization staff*. Through a "secretive digitization" agreement with a private consortium, part of Canada's heritage is now available for purchase (Bibliocracy 2013). The interlibrary loan service was folded. Acquisitions were starved. The world-renowned National Archival Development Program, which sought a diverse record of our past, was dismantled.

Archivists, librarians, and staff were and are muzzled, ordered to adhere to a "duty of loyalty" to the "duly elected government." The government has set up a snitch line to dissuade anyone from getting out of step (Canadian Association of University Teachers 2011; Munro 2013; Turk 2014). Contrast this with the National Archives of Ireland, which opens newly declassified records with great fanfare. Last year, for three days, the whole place shut down as the press had a go at hitherto unknown facets of Ireland's past. Archivists dil-

igently helped reporters find the juiciest nuggets to feed the world, and the photocopier was rolled in to make everything nice and convenient.

CONSEQUENCES OF CUTS

Consider these changes in the context of injustices toward Indigenous peoples. Library and Archives Canada's transformations have undoubtedly stonewalled Indigenous peoples hoping to gather documentary evidence to assert their constitutional rights. These cuts also stymied efforts to collect every shred of data on the "national crime" (Milloy 1999) that was the residential school system.¹ Such obstructions are reminiscent of those that surrounded the Royal Commission of Inquiry to Investigate and Report the Circumstances in Connection with the Alleged Flogging of Indian Pupils Recently at Shubenacadie Residential School. Struck by Conservative Prime Minister R.B. Bennett in 1934, the commission's records were largely destroyed years ago in a seemingly obvious attempt to erase from memory this dark episode of Canada's history. With the assistance of Library and Archives Canada experts, I tracked down remnants of evidence that shed light on how this patently biased commission sanctioned barbaric acts against children in residential schools. What alternative democratic futures might have been imagined and realized decades ago with full

researcher access to the official record for study, contemplation, and discussion? How much suffering might have been prevented? How many *lives* might have been spared—thousands, maybe? We must ask such unsettling questions of Stephen Harper's government and its refusal to strike a royal commission on murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls; its apparent disregard of the tar sands contamination of Indigenous peoples' traditional food sources; and its discounting of the urgent need to address global warming. Will our national archives hold the answers we seek?

A CALL TO RECLAIM NATIONAL MEMORY

During my visit, I pass by the Supreme Court and then Parliament, nestled together as they are with Library and Archives Canada on the south side of the Ottawa River. Troubling questions come to mind. What happens when a country loses its ability to research itself, to reflect upon itself, to judge itself, to *know* itself? What occurs when so-called representatives of the people use and attack the national memory for partisan gain, for ideological buffoonery, or to prevent justice? What comes to pass when a government leaves its archives in a state of ruin? When is a presumed democracy no longer worthy of its name? The painful truth is that, like the bottom of a fragile archival box, a foundation of Canadian democracy seems to be giving way. Buried histories serve the interests of the powerful, and not those of the everyday people. This is a nightmare and not what my mother's beloved brother, my Uncle Joe, sacrificed his life for on February 17, 1945.

The people need to reclaim their national archives, and during this federal election year it is essential that we do. Let's reignite Library and Archives Canada's democratic potential. Let's visit 395 Wellington Street in unprecedented numbers. Let's make it a cele-



Through locked doors at the north side exhibition room.



Image of the author's uncle, Joseph Boehm, a rifleman with the Regina Rifles Regiment, in the ruins of Zylflich, Germany. This photo was taken on February 9, 1945, just days before his death. Image available at Library and Archives Canada, MIKAN 3512529.

brated ritual to go there *first*, before we take our tours of the Supreme Court and Parliament. Let's express our anger at what some might call a desecration. Let's insist on tours of the lost spaces as we would an ancient city. Let's peer into the space of that once wonderful café, so precious and meaningful that people wept at its passing. Let's insist on speaking with archivists. Let's place interlibrary loan orders with abandon and demand their fulfillment. Let's make voluminous access to information and privacy requests to find out why this transpired. Let's cast our votes for a government that cherishes collective knowledge, shared history, facts, and *truth*. Once thought protected at Library and Archives Canada, our national memory needs us now to defend it. We are standing in the ruins. We don't have any time to waste. 🍁

NOTES

- * To the memory of my brother Kevin David Murray (1958–2015), who lovingly guarded the memory of his Uncle Joe. Appreciation is extended to Jody Berland, Colin Coates, Janet Friskney, Phillip Hansen, Fay Hutchinson, and David Mutimer for providing comments that significantly enhanced the analysis herein. All errors are of course my own. Photographs of 395 Wellington Street are used with the permission of Public Works and Government Services Canada.
1. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hard work to create an archive of tens of thousands of relevant documents about residential schools faced serious government pushback. Responding to the commission's final report in the House of Commons, Stephen Harper refused to act on any of its recommendations and instead

defended his record on "Aboriginal affairs."

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