

Off The Record



Archives Association of Ontario

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On the Cover

It's the dog days of summer and Tinker the dog agrees that a nap in the sunshine is what's best. Photo 20508 from the Globe and Mail fonds (1266) at the City of Toronto Archives, dated June 1, 1930. Thanks to Michele Dale for providing a high-res scan. You can find nearly a hundred and fifty other adorable Tinker photos by searching the City of Toronto Archives [database](#).

About Us

The Archives Association of Ontario (AAO) was established in



1993 as a result of the amalgamation of the Ontario Association of Archivists and the Ontario Council of Archives. It is a network of archives and archivists providing programs, education, advocacy and shared knowledge, consisting of approximately 300 members.

The AAO promotes the development of a co-operative system of archives in Ontario by:

- Advocating on behalf of Ontario's archival community to the government of Ontario, local government and other provincial institutions in order to advance archival practice and promote the value of archives
- Promoting professional standards, procedures and practices among archival repositories
- Facilitating archival communication and cooperation among institutions, users and sponsors
- Providing leadership through communication and co-operation with individuals, groups and associations interested in the preservation and use of Ontario's documentary heritage

Additionally, the AAO offers a number of different services to its members. Please visit <http://aao-archivists.ca/Services> to learn more.

Message from the Editor

by Grant Hurley

As someone who works primarily on the digital side of the archival format divide, I consider the work involved in learning to actively preserve digital records for the future as of paramount importance to our profession. While there is still plenty of uncertainty when it comes to the steps required to process and manage born digital materials for the future, I think it is fair to say that there is a far greater degree of broadly established knowledge and practices now than there was even five years ago. But every once in a while I come across a news item that appears to undermine the remarkable work that has progressed in this field over the past several decades. Once such piece, titled [“How Digital Archives Delete the Human Experience,”](#) recently appeared in *The Walrus*. Written by David Sax, the author of a book titled *The Revenge of Analog: Real Things and Why They Matter*, the article gives a broad overview of the challenges of digital preservation and makes brief mention of these challenges as experienced at the University of Toronto’s Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. It discusses the basics that would be obvious to any reader here: storing data in a trustworthy manner for the long term takes effort, know-how and resources, but it glosses over the actual work involved, leaving it to anonymous “IT specialists” who are actually archivists and librarians actively engaged in this field. It clearly reveals Sax’s particular axe to grind: that digitized and born digital archival materials are too difficult to keep, untrustworthy because of their format, and worse still, cut us off from an emotional connection with

the materials. This latter perspective is based on an inherently false premise, but it is one that interests me the most: that digital things are somehow less “real” than analogue ones. While the experience of reading a book on paper and a book on screen may be quite different, it seems fundamentally wrong to argue that the digital book is somehow unreal, that it cannot be understood or experienced as part of the larger world. Digital objects (even ones like this humble digital newsletter) create and sustain our daily realities as much as non-digital ones, though the ways we interact with these materials do have different consequences for our relationships with them. But there is a relationship nevertheless.

This leads to another question that comes up every once and a while in our field but has yet to be satisfactorily answered: what are the attitudes and emotions of archivists when it comes to processing digital materials? While I’ve met many enthusiastic digital archivists, others I’ve spoken to about this on a personal basis have said that processing digital materials is less enjoyable than processing physical ones. But is this because of the intimidation factor, where the lack of clearer processes can sometimes get in the way of the fun part, or because these materials are inherently less interesting to delve into? Will this perspective change as millennial archivists (and younger) who grew up with digital systems begin their careers? Or is there something about the typical personality of an archivist that privileges the physical? I think these questions are immensely interesting. But these, and all of the other big and small questions of digital archives, demand good research rather than knee-jerk responses to the “threat” of the digital; those days of

fearmongering are hopefully over. The truth is that digital preservation is ... people. The so-called “digital dark age” will only happen if we make it so.

I hope that you enjoy this excellent Summer issue. Inside you will find an interview with longtime AAO member Robin Keirstead, a review of this year’s wonderful AAO award winners, updates from Lisa Snider, Archeion Coordinator, and Iona McCraith, Archives Advisor, and much more!



Message from the President

by **Juanita Rossiter**

Dear AAO members,

It’s been a little over a month since many of us gathered in Waterloo for the 2018 annual conference. A big thank you again to our hosts, the Southwestern Ontario Chapter (SWOC), the Program Committee (Nick Richbell, Chair) and Local Arrangements Committee (Julia Hendry, Chair) for putting on a great conference.

At this time, I would also like to acknowledge and thank outgoing Board members Christina Wakefield and Grant Hurley, and welcome incoming members John Lund as Chapter Stakeholder and Lauren Halsey as Director Without Portfolio. Also incoming are Rodney Carter as Chair of the Awards Committee and Emily Sommers as Chair of the Digital Access and Preservation Committee. The AAO Board will be contacting the membership shortly with a call

for committee members. If you have never been part of an AAO committee now could be your chance! It is a great way to network, make new friends in the field, and of course expand upon your existing skill set.

The 2018 AGM brought with it the introduction of two new committees: the Digital Access and Preservation Committee, and the Advancement Committee. Part of the Board’s work this year will be committed to working with these committees to help develop their respective frameworks.

Another area of focus this year will be the marketing of the AAO’s organizational History *[In Pursuit of the Archival Endeavour: The Story of the Archives Association of Ontario](#)*. The Board is grateful to the AAO Communications and Advocacy Committee under the direction of Bailey Chui, for taking the lead on the marketing of this book. You can order your book via the [AAO website](#).

Make sure to mark your calendars for the Institutional Development Committee’s annual Institutional Forum on October 25th. The Archives of Ontario will host the forum. This year you will get to take the subway all the way to the AO! More details to follow.

In closing, I’d also like to remind folks to check out the relatively new AAO account on Instagram ([archives.assoc.ontario](#)). Our AAO Website Administrator MacKenzie Gott has been doing a great job with AAO’s social media posts so please follow along!

Have a great summer folks!



Member Spotlight: An Interview with Robin Keirstead

When and why did you first join the AAO?

My involvement with the AAO coincides with its establishment in 1993. I joined the Ontario Association of Archivists (OAA) in 1989, shortly after I started working as an archivist in Ontario, so when the OAA and the Ontario Council of Archives merged to become the AAO I guess I became a charter member! Joining the OAA and subsequently the AAO was an obvious move for me. Shortly after beginning the MAS program at UBC in 1983, I was encouraged to become as active as possible in my “new” profession and so I joined both the Association of BC Archivists and the Association of Canadian Archivists. This proved to be great advice and over the years I found it a wonderful opportunity to learn about the diverse nature of the profession and to meet archivists from across the province and the country. Involvement in professional associations was—and continues to be—extremely rewarding for me, both professionally and personally.

What is your fondest memory from your involvement with the AAO?

This is a hard one to answer, as there have been many positive things over the years (typing this makes me feel old). If I had to choose, and apparently from the wording of the question I do, I can think of three. The first is my experience working with colleagues in the Kitchener-Waterloo-Cambridge-Guelph area to establish the

AAO’s Grand River Chapter in 1993 and then serving as its first President; it was an exciting time and I had the chance to work with a great group of colleagues in the region. The second relates to when I was program committee chair for the AAO’s 4th annual conference in Waterloo in 1997. I was fortunate to have an amazing group of committee members and while we worked very hard what I remember most is just how much fun we had together (oh, and the conference was a success as well). The third is having the opportunity over the years to meet individuals from archives of all types and sizes across the province when instructing workshops as part of the AAO’s professional development program. The interest and enthusiasm of those attending, coupled with their genuine desire to learn, was infectious, and I often discovered that I was learning as much from them as they were from me.

Reflecting on your career so far, what accomplishments are you the proudest of?

Given that pride is one of the seven deadly sins I am a bit hesitant to answer this, but in the interest of following instructions, a couple of things come to mind. I have been extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to establish two new archives and records programs and to build new teams, the first in 1989 at the Region of Waterloo and the second in 2001 at Western University. In each case, I am proud of what my colleagues and I were able to accomplish. It was both challenging and rewarding. I certainly learned many lessons—what to do and what not to do—and Western certainly benefitted from some of the latter lessons learned at the Region! Related to this, I am

also very proud to have been involved in the process that led to the construction of the Archives and Research Collections Centre (ARCC) at Western. Finally, I appreciated the opportunity to serve on the AAO Awards Committee for several years; it is a privilege to be able to recognize formally the amazing work of individuals and organizations throughout Ontario.

How have you seen the AAO make a difference for archivists practicing in Ontario?

When I think back to the state of archives in the province in 1993 and the wide diversity that existed in terms of professional knowledge and skills of individual archivists, there has been tremendous progress. Not all of this can be attributed to the work of the AAO itself of course, as the establishment of professional graduate programs was certainly an important factor. However, over the years the AAO has solidly supported those already working in the field and those unable to attend university-based programs by providing informal and formal opportunities for archivists to meet and share ideas and experiences and to develop their professional knowledge and skills. This was facilitated through the work of the local chapters and the special interest groups, as well as by events such as workshops and the annual conference. Special mention needs to be made of the AAO's ar-

chives advisor and professional development and education programs. Over the years, both significantly supported the work of individuals and institutions. While the AAO has played an important role in many other areas of course, it is here that I think the great contribution has been made in terms of supporting individual archivists and archives.

What is the most rewarding part of your work?



Robin Keirstead (Submitted photo).

Today much of my day-to-day work falls under the general umbrella of “archival management and administration” and so while this has its own rewards, often they are achieved somewhat vicariously through the success of my colleagues. However, when the opportunity presents itself I do find it very satisfying to interact with donors, researchers, and other visitors to the archives. I particularly enjoy working with students, whether giving an archives tour or introductory class on primary source research to undergraduates, or helping graduate students with a course assignment or thesis research. I find their interest and enthusiasm to be infectious. So too is their excitement and sense of awe when they encounter particular documents. This is very refreshing, as I sometimes find myself becoming rather blasé about the richness of our archival holdings here at Western. When

one is exposed to such wonderful materials on a regular basis one can temporarily lose that sense of perspective. It is refreshing to have students remind me just how lucky those of us who work in archives really are, not only to have such wonderful collections but also to have the privilege—and responsibility—of preserving and providing access to them.

What do you see for the future of our profession?

Ah, the crystal ball question. Without question, as a profession we face many challenges today, not the least of which is the need to increase our individual and collective capacities to embrace the digital world in all its various dimensions. At the same time, we must not abandon our analog legacy; notwithstanding the speed of technological change, we need to recognize that some archivists will have to live in both worlds for some time. I also think that we need to accept the blurring of professional lines, which can often be driven by external rather than internal forces. While the distinctly defined role of archivist will remain in many institutions for years to come, I believe that others, particularly those with limited resources or without a history of having archives, will increasingly seek out generalist information professionals, those with the combined knowledge and skills of archivists, librarians and/or records managers. I think we need to be open to this integration of roles and functions, and not be too hung up on titles or the clear separation of responsibilities (by the way, that rumbling and scraping you just heard was likely a few of the past generation of archival theorists rolling over in their graves). I also see great potential, alt-

hough likely an even greater challenge, for archivists to play an important role in information governance. The degree to which many institutions have embraced information governance as a means to recognize and leverage the value of information in all its facets is providing the records and information management profession with new opportunities to maintain or enhance their status as key contributors. Archivists can and should be at the table as well, although I recognize that this will be an uphill battle for many. Ultimately, I see lots of potential in the future and, to continue the fine tradition of misquoting Mark Twain, I believe that the report of our professional demise is greatly exaggerated!



The 2018 AAO Awards

The AAO Awards Committee—comprised of Carolynn Bart-Riedstra (Chair), David Sharon, Jean Dryden, and Rodney Carter—were pleased and honoured to present three awards at the conference in Waterloo. We congratulate all the award recipients and thank the AAO members who took the time to prepare such strong nomination packages so that we could recognize and celebrate the award winners.

The Alexander Fraser Award

This award is given to individuals who have contributed in a significant way to the advancement of the archival community in Ontario, recognizing cumulative contributions rather than any single activity.

This year, the Alexander Fraser Award was presented to M.C. Havey for her contributions to the archival community in Ontario through her championing of religious archives and her tireless work preserving the stories and legacies of the Canadian Catholic community.



M.C. Havey receiving the Alexander Fraser Award. Left to Right: Robert McIntosh, M.C. Havey, Rodney Carter. Photo: Nancy Maitland.

In addition to her work as archivist for the Sisters of Service and the Edmonton-Toronto Redemptorists, M.C. has been active in the development and growth of the Catholic Archivist Group, serving on various committees over the years, including Chair, and in this capacity, she has mentored countless archivists, sharing her experiences and wisdom about working as a “lone arranger” within small religious archives.

She’s also been an active participant of the Canadian Catholic Historical Association and her participation with this group has helped foster a connection between historians, the most common users of religious archives, and the archival community.

M.C. has worked on several important projects which have ensured the safekeeping of Catholic archival records, offering advice and assistance to smaller congregations of women religious, the Our Lady’s Missionaries and Sisters of Charity of the Immaculate Conception, and in overseeing the transfer of the personal fonds of influential Redemptorists to the most appropriate institutions.

Throughout her archival career, M.C. has proven time and again her generosity and dedication towards the archival community.

The James J. Talman Award

The James J. Talman award is given to an individual who has demonstrated an outstanding level of imagination and innovation in contribution to the profession, their institution, or the archival community, or have challenged conventional thinking about archival work.

We were pleased to present the 2018 Talman Award to Danielle Robichaud for her work in encouraging archivists to contribute to Wikipedia, and by showing how archivists can be activists in implementing the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She has led by example in many respects: by improving Wikipedia articles (she has logged more than 4,250 edits in Wikipedia), training archivists how to use Wikipedia, and leading Wikipedia Edit-a-thons.

Danielle chose Wikipedia as one means of addressing her concerns about reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada. As she said, “By making the decision to move beyond guilt and defensiveness to an action-oriented view of reconciliation I ... [focused] on ... creating a reliable page to ... raise



Danielle Robichaud receiving the James J. Talmán Award. Left to Right: Robert McIntosh, Danielle Robichaud, Rodney Carter. Photo courtesy of Danielle Robichaud.

awareness about the school system and facilitating the retrieval of resources by others seeking to improve their own understanding of its impact.” In 2017, the Wikipedia page on the Canadian Indian Residential School System (which carries 434 edits made by Danielle), was designated a Featured Article by Wikipedia’s editors. Featured articles are considered to be among the best Wikipedia has to offer. Danielle also created a resource page on the AAO website identifying what archivists can do to implement the recommendations of the TRC.

Corporate Award

The AAO’s Corporate Award is given to organizations, corporations, or agencies of any kind that have been particularly supportive of archives and/or the archival community. The 2018 Corporate Award was presented to Labatt Breweries of Canada.

In 2011, a fruitful partnership between Labatt Breweries of Canada and the Western Archives began in earnest. That year, Labatt donated its massive corporate archives spanning over 170 years and encompassing more than 2600 boxes to Western University. The donation was not only impressive for its size and historical content, but Labatt also revealed its generous nature by providing accompanying funds to the Western Archives to assist with staffing, processing and purchasing supplies for these new materials.

In 2016, Western Archives and Labatt agreed to collaborate on a project for Labatt’s 170th anniversary that would high-



Labatt Breweries receiving the Corporate Award. Left to Right: Robert McIntosh, David Sharron, Sharon MacKay, Amanda Oliver, and Robin Keirstead. Photo: Iona McCraith.

light the richness of the collection, increase its accessibility, and support student learning. Labatt and Western staff worked together to design features and potential narratives for the exhibit and Labatt hired a web design firm to create the site. This was an excellent opportunity to share resources and build a stronger relationship.

The website officially launched in October 2017 allowing users from around the world to benefit from having access to its content. Further, this project allowed Western staff and students to gain invaluable technological skills, such as digitization, virtual exhibit design, and digital storytelling which will be applied to future projects.

AAO Emerging Leader Award

At the Annual Conference in Waterloo, the Awards Committee also announced the creation of a new award.

Created to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Archives Association of Ontario, the AAO Emerging Leader Award celebrates early-career archivists whose work and service demonstrates consistent growth, leadership and promise to the archives profession in Ontario. Achievements may include involvement in professional organizations, and/or participation in relevant projects, and/or written and scholarly work. This award is intended to recognize cumulative contributions rather than any single activity.

Nominees must be an AAO member whose professional work and service is primarily within Ontario and meet as many of the following criteria as possible for consideration:

- Must have more than two years and less than ten years of professional archives experience.
- Representative work shows influence on the archives profession beyond the nominee's home institution/employer and holds promise for future contributions.
- Demonstrated leadership through collaborative work or exemplary service to local, regional, and/or provincial archival and heritage organizations within Ontario.
- Involvement in successful outreach and advocacy efforts on behalf of the archives profession.

Supporting documentation should demonstrate the nominee's development as a leader in the archival community

Current board members, Awards Committee members or employees of the AAO are not eligible.

A nomination must be received prior to the application deadline unless agreed upon by a unanimous decision of the Awards Committee.

The Awards Committee reserves the right to seek adjustments to nominations according to the appropriate categories as part of the application process.

This award will be given out for the first time at the 2019 conference.



AAO Updates

The Archives Association of Ontario and Archives of Ontario symposium, *Unsettling Archives: Challenging Our Past – Challenging Our Practice*, originally scheduled for October 24, 2018, has been postponed until the Spring of 2019. Stay tuned for more details!

Attention Institutional Members!

The 2018 Institutional Issues Forum, presented by the Institutional Development Committee, will be held on October 25th at the Archives of Ontario, from 9:15 am to 3:30 pm. Coffee and light refreshments to be provided, however participants are on their own for lunch. The Archives of Ontario is located on the York University campus with nearby restaurants. The site is accessible by subway from all major points in the GTA. Parking is also available on campus. In addition to IDC business, and updates on indigenous issues, the provincial acquisition strategy, accessibility, and board activities, sessions are currently being planned on the following topics:

- Collaboration between archives
- Collaboration within the records, technology, access and privacy communities
- Digital preservation

All institutional members (or their delegates) are welcome. Participation is free. For further information, please contact [Paul Henry](#), IDC Chair.

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Thank you!

2018 AAO Conference Workshops Review

by **Lisa Snider**

Archeion Coordinator

I had the great pleasure of presenting two half-day workshops before the May 2018 AAO Conference in Waterloo. The workshops were “Archival Description with RAD” and “Subject Headings and Taxonomies.” Even though both workshops were structured around Archeion (AtoM), the information was still useful if participants used other systems, or software, in their institutions. There was a diverse group of participants in each workshop, who shared their ideas and experiences, and this added great insight to the prepared workshop content.

The first part of the “Archival Description with RAD” workshop covered the basics of archival arrangement and description. We looked at how archivists conduct arrangement in terms of analysis and organization, which I compared to being like a CSI expert and Martha Stewart, although we try not to organize by colour like Martha does!

We then went over the basics of description and the Rules for Archival Description (RAD). We looked at the hierarchical levels of RAD, and had a short discussion about the future of RAD. This led us to look at the concept of ‘RADish’. In my experience as Archeion Coordinator, and also as Archeion Assistant, I found that some people use RAD to the letter, but many others only use certain parts of RAD, and I call this “RADish.” I see “RADish” in both field use and content of fields. I am finding that more people choose not to fill out all the RAD re-

quired fields in descriptions, especially at the Series level or below. I am also seeing fewer people use the RAD punctuation rules in the content of fields, particularly in the Physical Description field. There, I am finding that many institutions are not using the RAD required semi colons, commas and spaces. However, even though many of us may not use RAD in the strict sense, preferring “RADish” instead, it is still a very useful standard to learn and use, when possible.

The second part of the “Archival Description with RAD” workshop consisted of participants learning how to create a fonds description, a basic Series description and an authority record in Archeion (AtoM 2.4). This section allowed me to show participants the RAD (and ISAAR for authority records) related fields that we would like people to fill out in Archeion, with example content. This gave everyone some hands on experience with RAD and Archeion (AtoM 2.4).

The second workshop was on the topic of “Subject Headings and Taxonomies.” I defined, and gave examples of, uncontrolled and controlled vocabularies and we discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each one. In the uncontrolled vocabularies section, we looked at examples of tagging by the public. One of the projects I highlighted was the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) Co-Lab. In this project, LAC has asked the public to provide keywords and tags for some of their digitized indigenous related materials. In the controlled vocabularies section, we defined, and looked at examples of, different types of controlled vocabularies. This included pre-packaged vocabularies that participants can use on their own websites or offline systems, such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH),

Getty Art and Architecture Thesaurus (AAT), Canadian Subject Headings (CSH), etc.

The second half of the workshop was, for me, the most challenging, but also the most interesting part. We looked at actual examples of online digitized materials from different institutions that related to LGBTTQI, black, disability and indigenous communities, and how pre-packaged and non-pre-packaged vocabularies/subject headings used to describe, or index, them were problematic in many ways. We also looked at one potential solution proposed by Manitoba librarians and archivists for indigenous subject headings, called the AMA LCSH. They reviewed LCSH indigenous related terms, sought indigenous communities input and then changed, deleted or added brand new terms that fit with the Manitoba indigenous communities and landscape.

The challenge for me in presenting this part of the workshop was that I found I was providing questions, but no real answers to the potential problems of using subject headings or vocabularies to describe archival materials. However, as my wise participants noted, it helped them to know they weren't alone with these kinds of issues, as many had encountered them in their work, to some degree. The reality is that working with subject headings, taxonomies, vocabularies, etc. is 'a messy business'. However, I hope that participants came out of the workshop feeling better about not being alone with these issues, thinking about 'outside the box' solutions for their situations, and/or possibly looking at collaborating with other institutions to find common solutions.

We ended the workshop by looking at the Archeion Subject Headings list. We dis-

cussed the challenge of working with a mix of controlled and non-controlled vocabularies or subject headings. This is something I will write more about in a future OTR article, so stay tuned!

If you are interested in future workshops, or have developed your own vocabulary or subject headings list and want to share it with me, please contact the [Archeion Coordinator](#).



Archives Advisor Update

by Iona McCraith

AAO Archives Advisor

Since the last issue of *Off the Record* was published at the end of April 2018 it has been a busy Spring for me. Here is an update on highlights of my activities. May saw another successful AAO conference in Waterloo, where I was able to meet and talk with many members at events, over lunches, or when I was assisting at the registration desk. I always look forward to these annual meetings. This year being the 25th anniversary of AAO was especially exciting and saw the official launch of our publication *In Pursuit of the Archival Endeavour: The Story of the Archives Association of Ontario*. If you haven't already purchased your copy of this amazing story you can still do so on the [AAO website](#).

I was appointed Board Liaison for the newly formed Digital Access and Preservation Standing Committee and look forward to attending their first meeting on July 25th.

Watch for future reports on their plans and activities later this year.

Site visit season is heating up again and I had the pleasure of meeting with staff at Simcoe County Archives in June and Norfolk County Museum and Archives in July. Always a pleasure to see what is happening with our colleagues and to tour their institutions.

I also had the opportunity to visit for the first time the [Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre](#) in Toronto in June. I was attending the AGM of the Ontario Historical Society and their awards presentations with an information table on the AAO programs and services. It was very interesting to hear about the many amazing people and projects helping to preserve Ontario heritage in all its forms and diversity through publications, television programs, preservation projects, etc.

As always I continue to also handle your inquiries via [email](#) and phone and to interact through AAO social media. I enjoy receiving your questions so keep them coming!



Remarks on the 2018 AAO Conference Panel “Our Past Makes Our Present, Makes Our Future”

by John Smart

At the 2018 AAO conference panel “Our Past Makes Our Present, Makes Our Future,” which celebrated the launch of the AAO’s history, *In Pursuit of the Archival Endeavor*, I was asked to answer this ques-

tion: “Based on the research you have done into the history of the Ontario Association of Archivists and the Archives Association of Ontario, what do you think are the most important lessons for the AAO going forward?”

I will make three unconnected points that might be worth the attention of future AAO board members. One lesson I think the Ontario Archives Association (OAA) experience illustrates is that a single individual can affect the field and achieve great things working largely alone. Numerically speaking, most archives in Ontario are small institutions often led by a single individual. That individual can, and in many cases we have seen it done, underpin and sustain the cultural historical life of a community through a lifetime’s work. I am thinking of persons such as the late Jim Anderson who brought the Stratford-Perth Archives into being and built a real archives network in that part of the world during his lifetime. Inside the old OAA the late Jennifer Bunting launched the post-appointment training program the AAO carried on for many years. And we should not forget the dynamism of Garron Wells who in 1982 called the founding meeting of the OAA when few archivists in the province thought such an organization was needed. I think I see all over the province smart, well-intentioned hardworking archivists in institutions big and small following their own insights and making a difference. I like that feature in the archives field and I hope it never disappears.

On the negative side, perhaps, I think our history shows us the importance of government funding in our life as an organization. I wish the Ontario and federal governments understood better the role organizations like the AAO, the Association of Canadian Archivists and the Canadian Council of Archives play in maintaining the archival system in this country. We all saw the devastating cuts made to Library and Archives Cana-

da by the Harper government in 2012. As part of those cuts we lost the National Archival Development Program which since 1985 had provided so much support to smaller archives across Canada. Present leadership at LAC shows some desire to mitigate the effects of the 2012 cuts but without full government backing they cannot do much to repair the damage. At our provincial level I have never understood why positions such as the Archives Advisor and the Archeion Coordinator are not made full time employees of the Archives of Ontario. I understand the financial constraints the AO faces, and I know the Archives of Ontario granted us \$45,700.00 last year, but I don't see why the AAO has not more strongly fought for this kind of support from the province. Surely those who hold the positions of Archives Advisor and Archeion Coordinator would be better off if they were Ontario civil servants.

Finally, as lessons go, I think it is worth asking ourselves why the AAO today has fewer members today than it did when it started out twenty-five years ago. In 1992 the OAA told the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications in a funding application that it had about 550 members. The AAO membership, for the 2011-2012 fiscal year was only 308 members in total, with 152 Individual members and 156 Institutional members. At the April 2017 AAO Conference in Toronto attendees were told that the AAO had 374 members, fifty-two percent of them Institutional members. The 2018 AAO Annual Review says we have 435 members in total as of March 2018, a notable increase overall, but only 131 of these members are Individual members, indicating some loss in that category. It would be useful to do a study of AAO membership figures from 1993 on. AAO membership totals seem to indicate an historical loss of individual members over time. I am sure successive AAO Boards over the years have

wrestled with this problem but do we really understand why we do not have more members?

The new AAO Board elected at the 2018 Conference will have plenty to do but I hope it might profit them to take a look at these three points as matters they might consider among their deliberations over the course of the next year.



Archives in Fiction: *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996) and Other Works by Seth

by Grant Hurley

[This article is the third of an occasional series on the representations of archivists and archives in fiction by Ontario authors. Please reach out with suggestions on what I should read next, or contribute a piece of your own! - Ed.]

The Canadian cartoonist Seth should be, by all accounts, an archivist's favourite. An obsession of Seth's is the relationship between the past and the present, especially when it comes to individuals. How have single events, sometimes the smallest of moments, shaped us as people? How do we read and understand our pasts, and can they ever be truly known after the fact? These are not necessarily unique questions. But the manner in which Seth addresses them through his large body of graphic novels and comics is attentive, insightful, and often very personal. His works are also deeply situated in this province. Individual frames or spreads in his comics often feature snapshots of Southwestern Ontario's

particular landscapes drawn with affection and interest. Seth's eye is attracted to the streetscapes of small towns like Strathroy and Clinton, where he spent his childhood, and the ways in which our underappreciated daily vernacular—the old brick bank building, the local diner—creates a sense of home. Seth has also embarked on important projects to collect and edit other cartoonists' works, and his work to recover the legacy of Canadian cartoonist Doug Wright involved quite a lot of time at Library and Archives Canada, where many of Wright's original drawings are housed. But I sense that archivists aren't aware of his work, on a broad basis, and how it might inform their own thinking or practice. This article sets out to provide a small introduction to what I think is most important about Seth's fictional works for archivists: the use archival materials as narrative, and the recognition that nostalgia alone does not make a good story.

Seth's graphic novels and comics are spread out over nearly thirty years. He started producing the ongoing series *Palookaville* in 1991. Several *Palookaville* series became books of their own: *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* (1996) and *Clyde Fans: Book One* (2004). He has also published standalone works from his notebooks, such as *Wimbledon Green* (2005) and *The Great Northern Brotherhood of Canadian Cartoonists* (2011), which

features an amazing northern comics archive in an igloo-shaped structure. Finally, his monumental *George Sprott (1894–1975)*, originally serialized in *The New York Times Magazine*, was published in 2009. It is also worth noting his enormous amount of design and illustration work for large and small press publishers alike. A long running project has been the lovely design of the literary magazine *Canadian Notes and Queries*. His edition of Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Small Town* is a triumph. And as previously mentioned, he was responsible for releasing *The Collected Doug Wright, Volume One* as well as designing all twenty-six volumes of *The Complete Peanuts*, among other compilations of important comics.

It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken is a novel about a character also named Seth who is on an obsessive quest to uncover the details of Kalo, a Canadian cartoonist whose work has been largely forgotten. His search for Kalo's works takes

him digging through junk shops and used bookstores for samples of his cartoons, and eventually to Kalo's surviving family, whose details on his life and works as a cartoonist are sparse. At the very end of the book, Seth includes eleven examples of Kalo's cartoons. Throughout the book, Seth muses on his own personality and difficulty forming lasting relationships. His interest in Kalo is seemingly easier for him to sustain than a



The cover of *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken* by Seth (Drawn & Quarterly)

relationship with Ruthie, a woman he meets at the Toronto Reference Library, for example. But outside of the novel, Kalo is fictional, and the cartoons were drawn by Seth himself (complete with surrounding articles and advertisements, as if they were clipped from magazines) in his imagining of Kalo's drawing style. It's not the realism of Kalo that is important so much as the meaning of the fictional Seth's search.

Archivists will immediately relate to the novel especially for that oftentimes-obsessive desire to track down a person, to find something substantial about a life, with all of the false leads and dead ends that one encounters. Or how little, at the end of the day, a birth and death date can really say about a person. Kalo remains an enigma, despite some of the tidbits that Seth manages to collect about him. What Seth begins to refine here, though, is a way for archival records to speak for themselves: not to offer concrete answers, but to assist in crafting a deeper, more interpretive narrative. He has refined this approach in the work that has followed *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*. His most common method is to insert photographs, usually, but also other documents, as frames within the comic page. In *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, these images are constrained by the panels and sometimes represented as scrapbooks, but in his works that follow, they start to break free, to become full panels themselves, with the ragged edges of old snapshots intact. And of all materials, Seth loves drawing portraits the most: the formal group photos, or portrait collage arrays that used to cover the walls of businesses and schools. In reaching these, the reader is encouraged to pause and read the people pictured as part of the story, much like the other panels in a comic. Doing so replicates in a small way the act of reading a photograph in an archival context. But instead of the context provided by the finding aid, the provenance

here is the rest of the story. For example, in *It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken*, a single drawn photograph of Kalo is represented. It's repeated three times, in fact, and each time with slightly greater focus until you can more clearly see Kalo's eyes. They're illustrated as small, set deep in his head, but seem somehow kind and thoughtful. What can this tell us about him? To add even further to the ambiguity, Seth includes what is purported to be a real photo of Kalo at the very end of the book: a snapshot of a man leaning against a building. Reading these small pieces in the context of the book encourages a dynamic interpretation that trains the reader to read archival materials as texts themselves. These are archival skills: treading through often disconnected pieces of information whose meaning can be opaque, but guided by the structure of available details on provenance and other contextual information, to form the beginnings of a story.

It's a Good Life, If You Don't Weaken comes with another theme that resonates archivally: the temptation to romanticize the past. Seth's character in the novel (and I should make it clear that they are not necessarily equivalent) is constantly questioning whether the present is worse than the past. There are obvious problems with this kind of general nostalgia, and Seth acknowledges them in the novel: the seeming simplicity of the past was a time of great violence and persecution for many on the what was the wrong side of a gender, racial or class-based divide. But most interesting to Seth, especially later in his career, is the experience of personal nostalgia: the desire to go back to a primary moment in one's past and explore its resonances. As the character Seth says, "I look at my childhood like it's some sort of golden key. If I just ponder it, sift through it, pick at it enough, I feel like I'll find the answer to every goddamn thing that's wrong with me now" (p. 41). He also describes the

way remnants of the past survive in the present as a “ghost world,” which can’t be anything but a reference to the well-loved Daniel Clowes comic of the same name (unless it is merely sympathetic coincidence) (p. 43). The subject of nostalgia relates back to the same theme as expressed by the use of archival materials: that the past is ultimately unknowable, and even the most intense excavatory work, even by an individual person about herself, cannot fill in all the gaps. As Seth later acknowledges in the novel, too much time spent pouring over the details of one’s past leads nowhere. Nostalgia, then, becomes a potential barrier for moving forward with the story. But this is not to say that the past does not constantly invade the present—it does—but that reading the traces, and perhaps learning to read the traces narratively rather than neurotically, is more positive than travelling backwards to an imagined better time. It is this way that a de-

veloped archival intelligence can counter the simplicity of nostalgia: the more nuance one encounters in working with archival traces, the more likely one is to recognize that a monolithic “better” past never existed. But that process of identifying what is good, and what needs to change, is a constant process of learning, recognition, and action, on the part of archivists and their users.

Seth’s work is immensely complex and rewarding for these reasons and more. I highly encourage archivists to pick up one of his books

and explore his fictional pasts for themselves.

Book citation: Seth. (1996). *It’s a Good Life, If You Don’t Weaken*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly.

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Two spreads from Seth’s *George Sprott (1894-1975)*
(Drawn & Quarterly)

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