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National Archives of Canada Web-Site

On 5 May 1999, the National Archives of Canada officially launched its new web-site, containing the on-line research tool ArchiviaNet. Historians, genealogists, and other researchers now have better access to selected fonds, inventories, databases, and image collections at Canada's premier research institution. The current web-site replaces an earlier one (in existence since December 1995) and incorporates information previously available on five separate National Archives of Canada-produced CD-ROMs (ArchiVia-1, ArchiVia-2, Prime Ministers, Colonial Archives, and Aboriginal Peoples). The latter were only accessible in reference rooms at the archives in Ottawa and at work-stations set-up at universities, regional archives, and other select sites across Canada. Usage was not particularly high, and this reviewer remembers one such work-station which collected dust in the corner of the special collections room at the University of British Columbia. The decision to focus instead on the Internet will undoubtedly bring the scope of the National Archives of Canada's impressive collection to the attention of a much wider audience. The ability to access from home, the office, or anywhere with an on-line connection is certainly hard to beat for convenience and saves precious time if one is visiting the archives from outside the National Capital Region. Labourious hours in the reference room pouring through hard-copy finding aids now can be put to better use, although the opportunity to discover those obscure and strangely organized or named files by using one's "peripheral vision" will, of course, never be replaced by simple key word or subject searches.

Cataloguing and digitizing archival holdings in electronic form is necessarily a huge undertaking. The National Archives of Canada has made a good start to what will be a long and expensive process. The utility of ArchiviaNet ultimately relies on the quality and breadth of the indexes and databases. Overall, the master plan and implementation seems well thought-out. Material is organized by existing record group or manuscript numbers, with citations and simple descriptions right down to the file level. Indeed, the information provided is sufficient for a researcher to fill-out an order form to view the documents in the reading room or order photographs. Number codes used to identify the location and access status of retained records are somewhat awkward for anyone unfamiliar with the coding system; the site could be made a bit more user friendly. Actual coverage is still quite spotty, and many record groups await proper description and indexing. Priority appears to have been given to older Privy Council records and other series in high or popular demand from researchers. Those working in the fields of military history and strategic studies have the advantage that records in RG 9 and RG 24 are among the most heavily used at the National Archives of Canada and are probably higher on the priority list than other record groups.

Electronic databases such as the current Canadian soldiers tried before courts martial in World War I have great potential, but require a great deal of background information such as full name and regimental number in order to be used effectively. At sometime in the future, researchers may be able to view pages from regimental war diaries on-line; nonetheless, for the time-being, many war diaries have been microfilmed and are available on-site in Ottawa or through inter-library loan. Indeed, the National Archives of Canada would be smart to use its on-line efforts to complement other projects already underway. The end goal is to get good information to the researcher or user in a timely fashion; electronic databases, microfilm, and paper are simply mediums to facilitate accessibility.

It will probably be many years before a complete set of finding aids and inventories at the National Archives of Canada find its way on-line and many more before the records themselves are available over the Internet. Privacy concerns and institutional restrictions ensure that some documents will not be open to the general public anytime soon, whether electronically or on-site. The National Archives of Canada, however, is to be applauded for embracing the new information age and appreciating the potential benefits for accessibility which on-line research tools can provide. It is the way of the future, and no archives, especially at the national level, can afford to be left behind. ArchiviaNet and other activities will ensure that the National Archives of Canada remains the premiere archival institution in the country into the next century.

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