

2009

Review of *Keepers of the Record: The History of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives*. By Deidre Simmons

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BOOK REVIEWS

Keepers of the Record: The History of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives. By Deidre Simmons. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. xiv + 360 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$95.00 cloth, \$34.95 paper.

Given the remarkable character of the Hudson's Bay Company Archives, it is a little hard to believe that this is the first comprehensive study of their history. It was worth the wait, though, as Simmons deftly weaves more than three centuries of people and paper into a narrative as captivating as the records themselves. As Simmons observes in her introduction, this book is much more than just the history of the HBCA as an institution: it is both a history of the HBC's record-keeping (and record-keepers) from its earliest days and a case study in British and Canadian archival history.

Although Simmons occasionally struggles with the task of placing the company and its operations in their broader historical contexts, her grasp of its internal workings is strong. She illustrates her examination of early record-keeping with discussions of the motives and people behind the paperwork: her detailed look at clerk Samuel Hopkins (fl. 1715-31) is particularly informative. The reforms and reorganisations of the nineteenth century are given a new perspective as part of a more "modern" company's accounting and reporting systems. New light is also shed on the company's transition from fur trade to settlement, and the several bureaucratic changes that entailed.

Simmons's most valuable contribution is her explanation of the company's slow and

sometimes awkward transition from thinking of its accumulated records as private business documents to thinking of them as an archival resource of great public value. The emergence of the Archives Department, the story of the Hudson's Bay Record Society, the evolving relationships with researchers in Britain and North America, and the physical and psychological removal of the archives from London to Winnipeg are all related in some detail. Of particular interest are the HBCA's early and ongoing connections with the Public Record Office (especially that giant of archival studies, Sir Hilary Jenkinson) and with the Public Archives of Canada.

In 2007, the archival records of the HBC's first 250 years (1670-1920) were placed on the UNESCO Memory of the World registry. The thousands of researchers who access the archives every year have long recognised the HBCA as a treasure. I have made extensive use of the archives myself, consulting not only a range of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century documents on microfilm, but also historian A. S. Morton's research notes taken in 1933-34 and Archivist Alice Johnson's correspondence with researchers in North America during the 1950s. The archives have changed dramatically since Morton's visit, but I sincerely hope the current Manager of the HBCA will consider reviving one tradition from those early days of public access: the afternoon tea trolley.

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