Custodians of a great inheritance: an account of the making of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives, 1920-1974

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Abstract:
The Hudson’s Bay Company Archives at the provincial Archives of Manitoba is indispensable for the study of many aspects of Canadian history. This thesis will survey the history of the company’s management of its archives from the establishment of the company in 1670 to the transfer of approximately 120 tons of archival material to Canada in 1974. The major theme in this history is the dilemma of access which the archival holdings presented to the company in the twentieth century. Sustained company interest in its old records as formal archives does not emerge until the early twentieth century when the company recognised that its history was of increasing interest to scholars who wanted access to the records and that its history could also be a valuable popular marketing asset. The company began to provide proper archival management of its historical records and, in so doing, realised that it had a responsibility to act as custodian of records which were of considerable importance to those interested in Canadian history. At the same time the company was very cautious about allowing publication of information from its archives. It did not want uncontrolled access to what it still often thought was sensitive company information. This thesis deals mainly with the company’s efforts to respond to its archival dilemma between the 1920s and 1974. During that time the company tried various measures to pursue the marketing and cultural goals it saw for its archives without granting unrestricted access. Gradually, however, it allowed more access to the archives. Indeed, by 1974, the company had resolved the dilemma and transferred custody of its archives to the Provincial Archives of Manitoba under liberal terms of access.

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