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Preservation of Francophone Heritage Materials at the University of Alberta

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Abstract:

This paper will provide the context of francophone heritage collections' development and management by the University of Alberta Libraries (UAL). Readers will get a summary of the library's efforts to preserve, manage and provide easy online access to primary source materials. The paper will describe the Peel's Bibliography, an authoritative guide to prairie history and literature, and Peel's Prairie Provinces portal, a gateway to the multitude of heritage materials available online. It will outline the UAL's proactive approaches to the francophone cultural heritage preservation through digitization of analog and archiving born-digital materials, the challenges we encounter, the ways we address them, and the benefits our users receive as a result of our efforts.

Keywords: heritage materials, bibliography, digital preservation, web archiving, born-digital.

Historic overview

Alberta is a young province, although it was the home territory of Aboriginal people for centuries. The first fur trade posts were established in 1795 and European settlement of the region began in the 19th century. The first non-Aboriginal language spoken in Alberta was French, largely due to Catholic missionaries of the Oblate Order that made their way to the Fort Edmonton in 1838. Significant contributions were made by francophones to the settlement of the West and the founding of the province of Alberta. With the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1891, Edmonton saw a huge influx of anglophones at the beginning of the 20th century, and, gradually, the English language became dominant. Today, English is the principal language of communication in Alberta, with French in the second place. The francophone community continues to be strong. According to the 2011 Census, 19% of the population in the province (68,545 people) consider French their mother tongue and over 65% (235,565 people) know French and can communicate in it. Alberta has a rich francophone heritage, which has been recorded and reflected in print documents for the last two centuries. The written word helped to preserve the collective memory of the community's past.

Peel's Bibliography

A great contribution in the matter of recording the history of the region was made by Bruce Peel, university librarian, who compiled a bibliography of the three prairie provinces: Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. This work codifies prairie written literature and pictures the development of the region. Bruce Peel's Bibliography is acknowledged by authorities as the finest introduction to the literature of the Canadian Prairies ever compiled. Peel spent his lifetime tracking down, collecting, organizing and describing the printed materials in Western Canada. The history of the bibliography began in 1946, by chance, when Peel was preparing a talk on regional materials at the University of Saskatchewan. He started a card file on Western Canadian titles and subsequently came to a decision to produce a published bibliography that focused on the Prairies. The approach was to create an enumerative bibliography and track down as many relevant titles as he could. The information was gathered from many sources (university collections, numerous bibliographies, bookseller's catalogues, friends' recommendations) and from many places. Since most literature was printed and distributed outside the region, Peel visited the Public Archives of Canada, the Library of Congress and all major research libraries in Canada, the United States and Europe.

A Bibliography of the Prairie Provinces was published ten years later in 1956 and contained 2,769 bibliographic references for pamphlets, books, biographies, personal reminiscences of Alberta pioneers, small-town histories, plays, poems, etc. Many of the items date back to the earliest days of European exploration in the region and include a vast range of materials dealing with every aspect of the settlement and development of the Canadian West. Bruce Peel continued to collect and compile new bibliographic entries, many of them supplied by booksellers who were his major collaborators. A 130-page supplement was published in 1963, and a cumulative second edition appeared in 1973. As J.H. Archer wrote in his foreword to the second edition, the Peel bibliography provided a "highway back through our history to our beginnings. This work is a contribution to scholarship and a landmark in our western cultural development" (Ingles, Distad & Peel, 2003, p. xvi). After Peel's death in 1998, two of the University of Alberta librarians, Ernie Ingles and Merrill Distad, picked up the project. They completed the revision of the third edition, expanding the bibliography by 60 percent (7,429 entries), and saw it through to press in 2003.

Although English-language titles dominate the list, a significant portion of the bibliography covers writings in French, as many of them were produced by descendants from France, the Oblate missionaries in particular. The French-language items include memoirs, accounts of exploration and settlement, immigration pamphlets, novels and the Canadian Sessional Papers that were printed in both languages. These materials picture the development of the region and significantly contribute to our understanding of the past.

Bibliothèque Saint-Jean

The French collections described in Peel's bibliography are stored in different locations. The University of Alberta Libraries hold a substantial body of the materials. The University of Alberta Libraries (UAL) ranks as the second largest library in Canada and one of the twenty largest academic research libraries in North America (Distad, 2009, p. xi). Campus Saint-Jean, the dominant French educational institution in Western Canada, is an integral part of the University of Alberta. Founded in 1908 by the Oblate Fathers to train young men for a religious life, the Juniorate Saint-Jean ensured the survival of the French Culture in Edmonton. In 1976 the provincial government bought the Jesuit college Saint-Jean and transferred it to the University of Alberta. Renamed Faculty and later Campus Saint-Jean, the institution continues to serve as an extremely valuable agent for cultural and historical preservation for the French

Canadian community in the province (McMaster, 2008). Its library, Bibliothèque Saint-Jean, is considered to be the largest francophone library in Western Canada.

From its foundation, Bibliothèque Saint-Jean (BSJ) preserved materials of great historical, political, economic and cultural importance. It collected and stored the evidence of the francophone community development in Alberta. In 1984 the library acquired microfilms with all the issues of the French provincial papers *La Survivance* and *Le Franco-albertain* as well as other materials of historical value. On September 12, 1987, it was integrated into the University of Alberta library system. A year later, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate deposited 7000 volumes of their collection for a period of 25 years at the Bibliothèque Saint-Jean (Levasseur-Ouimet, 2003, p.28), and this became the foundation of the special collection. The library continued collecting materials of cultural and historical relevance. Other precious materials were purchased or accepted as gifts. Some rare books, pamphlets and newspapers of great research value enriched the library funds. In 2005, the Oblates took their materials back though gifted a significant portion of the collection to the library. In 2016, the BSJ special collection was moved to the off-site storage facility of the University of Alberta.

The rare books tell stories of the Alberta exploration and represent the unique francophone culture and heritage. Unfortunately, the library cannot ensure the openness of these resources to scholars and the public. The collections are of an inestimable value to researchers, but access to them is quite limited. Viewers can still consult materials on site but are not allowed to borrow them. In addition, paper documents are susceptible to deterioration over time. Due to their fragile nature, photocopying is restricted and is usually done by the staff. All of this creates obstacles in diffusing the information and ensuring public access to these cultural heritage documents.

Digitization and Peel's Prairie Provinces Portal

We treasure our past, and it is of vital importance to the future of scholarly research. As a memory institution, the university library has a responsibility to preserve the documentary heritage for the benefit of present and future generations. Digital technology has provided us with new tools for curation and preservation. Digitization became paramount in managing risks, safeguarding the cultural heritage and enhancing access. In 2001 the University of Alberta began digitizing the items captured in Peel's bibliography. The objective was to digitize these treasures, place them on the web, and make them available to scholars, genealogists, local historians, cultural heritage groups, and everyone else interested in Alberta's history. Long-term preservation in the electronic format became a secondary goal of the project.

The launch of the [Peel's Prairie Provinces](#) website happened in May 2003. The online bibliography and digitized collections were built upon records found within the third edition of the print Peel's bibliography. The interface was prepared in both languages: English and French. Peel's Prairie Provinces became a true "portal of scholarship in Western Canadian history" (Osadetz, 2003) that brought the past to life. By digitizing, the library made information, previously available only to a selected group of users, accessible to all. This powerful research tool made "not only the digital bibliography but also the full documents underlying that bibliography, available online" (Osadetz, 2003).

The project was largely funded by the university with assistance from partners and a series of grants received from the Department of Canadian Heritage. Acknowledging that the description, indexing and online delivery of the digital materials was already a significant

undertaking, the UAL chose to outsource the scanning work first to OCLC, and later to other digitization service providers. The Peel's bibliography comprises many items that extend beyond the holdings of the University of Alberta, which has led to partnerships with Library and Archives Canada (LAC), the University of Calgary, the Glenbow Museum, the University of Manitoba, the University of Saskatchewan and others, to have their materials digitized and added to the site. These partnerships were essential, as it is through collaborative activities that we managed to populate the portal with digitized resources.

The UAL also hired staff to process digital objects. Specific in-house guidelines and policies were put in place on how the digital records should be managed. The master files were produced and preserved as TIFF files. To make electronic documents discoverable, the METS/ALTO open standards were used to segment and index scanned materials. Apache Solr was applied for full-text indexing. In this way, Peel's Prairie Provinces materials, though presented on the portal as images (TIFF and JPEG2000), are full-text searchable.

To provide the best possible access to the content, each digital object is accompanied with descriptive metadata. Metadata enables browsing and searching within and across the collections, and makes items discoverable through search engines. As a foundation, metadata for all items from the third edition of Peel's print bibliography was ingested verbatim. We also enhanced the records with additional subject headings and descriptive information. For other items, existing catalogue records (from the UAL and LAC) were ingested or created new, if no existing metadata was found. We used the [Metadata Object Description Schema \(MODS\)](#) to describe and enhance the records.

The Peel's Prairie Provinces book collection contains most but not all of the documents included in the bibliography. Copyright considerations are a factor. For certain documents (principally recently published) intellectual property concerns become roadblocks to digitization. We are unable to proceed with the digitization of these items until we receive the copyright clearance. Materials in public domain and materials, for which permissions were received, are available online. Digitized resources with undetermined copyright status, e.g. the rights holder cannot be found, are excluded from the online viewing. They are stored on the institutional server but not visible to the public due to the applied algorithm.

The Peel's Prairie Provinces project is ongoing and the number of electronic materials is growing steadily. The UAL has built the necessary tools and resources to support their expansion and curation. The number of partners has grown, as many institutions see the value in preserving the historic materials. We occasionally receive small financial contributions from other libraries and organizations for specific projects. The UAL continue to enrich the Peel's Prairie Provinces website with materials that are not in the bibliography but fit the Peel's criteria, i.e. have heritage value and relate to the development of the Prairies. Over the years, the repository was supplemented with digitized collections of newspapers, maps, images and others. It grew into an online digital portal, a true gateway to the multitude of materials in a variety of formats that constitute the collective memory of the region. As of summer 2017, the portal contains nearly 12,000 monographs, over 67,000 newspaper issues (4.9 million articles), 16,360 postcards, and 1,000 maps. Almost 20 % of digitized books are in French, over 1,700 of them relate to the Oblates. Major francophone newspapers such as *La Survivance*, *L'Union*, *La Liberté*, *Le Patriote de l'Ouest* are available for viewing online.

These materials, rich in text and images, meet learning and research needs of our users and help them understand the Prairie's history. The portal allows us to bring to light materials that were "hidden" and increase the use of collections. Resources can be searched by author, title, year, language and keywords. Viewers can quickly and independently find and print information from the web. In future, we plan to transform to RDF, so our metadata will be more linked data compatible. Collaboration with the Internet Archive and the opening of a new UAL digitization facility next year will increase library capacity to preserve many more volumes from our collections in the electronic format. We are also building a digital asset management system to support all of our digital collections.

A project of this size and scale always has its challenges. Preparing collections for digitization (selection, gathering, providing item identification documentation, etc.) is time-consuming and sometimes difficult work. Damaged, lost and hard-to-find documents, referenced in the bibliography, may limit the availability of original source copies. Resources are finite and there is always more that could be digitized, which requires regular review of our priorities. On the technical level, the quality of our scans has improved a great deal over time, but some materials, digitized in the early days, no longer meet our standards and need to be rescanned, requiring extra effort to locate the documents and additional cost to rescan them. Other challenges include copyright management, developing effective workflow and ensuring that our infrastructure keeps pace with technological developments.

Preservation of born-digital materials

In recent years, our preservation program has expanded to include born-digital materials. Since the late '90s, a lot of information has been generated and disseminated only in electronic form. Web materials are ephemeral: they come and go. Digital files cannot stay on a shelf to be dealt with later. If not curated, they can be lost forever. The University of Alberta took action to prevent these primary sources from disappearing and to preserve today's memory for the future.

Given the vast amount of digital content produced today, there is no comprehensive way to capture and preserve it all. We have to be strategic in our choices. The UAL partnered with the Internet Archive (IA) and subscribed to Archive-It, a major service for collecting and accessing cultural heritage on the web. Archive-It allows us to harvest, catalogue and manage digitally published collections through a user-friendly web application. In the summer of 2010 we ran our first tests and later populated the Archive-It platform with 18 web collections of interest, mainly materials published locally that relate to the development of the region. One of our priorities was archiving primary online materials that document the history of Francophone communities in Western Canada.

There are numerous web sites and e-resources developed by a number of francophone organizations and associations. Our challenge was to set criteria for selection, to find resources with relevant content and to determine their potential heritage value for future research. Denis Lacroix with two other librarians worked on evaluating digital content, selecting candidates for preservation and assessing the risk of not including others. They prepared a list of more than 100 websites representing the current developments in the francophone communities across four Western Canadian provinces, and highlighting their accomplishments, vitality and evolution over time. Archive-It was set to crawl the sites at regular frequencies (once a year), harvest and archive their content on the website within [La Francophonie de l'ouest canadien / Western Canadian Francophonie](#) collection.

Archive-It offers browsing capabilities as well as full-text searching of the collection's content. In terms of metadata, there is some basic information for each site including title, description, subject keywords and language. The files contain some metadata that is automatically captured such as title, crawl date, URLs, etc., but the unique descriptive information was added by librarians to help users have a more meaningful search and locate information using their own keywords.

The focus of preservation efforts is not only capturing the published information but also the look and feel of the selected sites. We archive them at the most comprehensive level possible (style sheets, embedded media, etc.) and capture accurately the content, design, organization, and functionality of the sites. The challenge we encounter is to maintain the integrity of the crawled information. Occasionally, the system does not capture what is intended. Frequent checks of harvested information are necessary to ensure that the collection is as complete as possible. Our main constraints are the lack of time, funds, and qualified personnel to verify and troubleshoot these issues. Obviously, the preservation and management of digital content bring challenges of a different nature, and it is evident that born-digital materials' capturing, organization and maintenance is not a one-time event but rather an ongoing task.

Conclusion

The preservation of heritage materials is one of the library's core missions, and it is crucial to protecting a sense of who we are. As a memory institution, the UAL embarked on several preservation projects. We continue an extensive program of print materials conservation. The written treasures, resources that date back to 19-20th centuries, e.g. Oblates' collection, and listed in the Peel's Bibliography, are housed in the designated facilities with proper temperature and climate conditions. We continue to build and maintain physical collections of current materials that have research value.

Given the rapid changes in technology and a growing demand for online access, preservation is not governed by paper-based thinking anymore, and a greater focus is given to digitization of valuable resources. With opportunities that were unimaginable in the past, we convert print collections into digital format and make them available online on our digital portal Peel's Prairie Provinces. It is a great addition to the traditional preservation program in the library. The Peel's Prairie Provinces website is an unparalleled collection of digitized materials reflecting Western Canadian history and the culture of the Canadian Prairies. It features a great number of full-text items (books, pamphlets, newspapers, etc.), of which at least 20% are in French and illustrative of the French-Canadian contributions to the exploration and development of Alberta and other prairie provinces. The ever-growing digital portal provides information to scholars investigating the social, political and economic history of the region. The benefit of the program is that researchers get easy access to materials online and the library ensures the longevity of valuable resources.

A great variety of sources is critical in reconstructing an accurate picture of the past. We use digital technologies to preserve print materials and we attempt to safeguard information that exists only in digital format. Preservation and management of digital content bring many challenges. Our main constraints are the lack of funds, qualified personnel and difficulties with priority setting. Curation of digitized materials, as well as organization and maintenance of born-digital materials require an ongoing attention and support.

Despite the challenges, the University of Alberta is leading the way in providing universal access to the heritage knowledge of Western Canada, which includes the rich body of francophone materials. We make the historic and cultural treasures accessible with one click of a mouse. The results of the university preservation efforts facilitate learning and scholarship and provide a bridge between the past and the future.

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