

Can hard drives replace archives?

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

With so much correspondence now conducted digitally, historians worry that the building blocks of tomorrow's biographies are disappearing into the ether

Imagine the prophet Mohammed returning from the mountain after receiving the latest sura from the angel Gabriel, only to discover the Blackberry he stored it on had crashed. Or the messenger Pheidippides, who gave us the word "marathon" by running non-stop from Marathon to Athens, just texting over his victory message.

The technology we use to record our lives affects the way we craft our histories. Researchers spend years sifting through archived letters, but now that a great deal of correspondence is conducted digitally, there is growing concern over how, and even if, our stories will be preserved. This fall presents the release of several Canadian biographies. Such new titles as Farley Mowat's final memoir, *Otherwise*, and Paul Martin's *Hell or High Water: My Life In and Out of Politics* focus on men who straddled the divide between the written age and the digital age.

A.B. McKillop, an award-winning historian and the chair of Carleton University's history department, managed to avoid this debacle by a generation. His recently released book, *Berton: A Biography* - about Canadian historian and television personality Pierre Berton - chronicles the life of someone who was a part of the last generation not to record a significant portion of their lives on digital technology. As with his previous biography of H.G. Wells, *The Spinster and the Prophet*, McKillop did not have to venture into the uncharted waters of digital sources.

Berton, who died at age 84 in 2004, wrote with a typewriter from his first days composing in the Klondike, and never embraced the word processors later thrust upon him by others. "In the business side of his life," McKillop wrote to me, in an e-mail interview, "the fax machine proved useful but mechanically inept, he had his assistants operate it for him. At home, he had trouble figuring out the VCR and the television remote." E-mails, needless to say, were beyond him.

Carl Spadoni is the director of the archives at McMaster University in Hamilton, which houses the bulk of Berton's materials. It is also the place where Peter C. Newman and Farley Mowat house their materials. "A number of writers consciously preserve and print out their digital correspondence for posterity," says Spadoni, "but many don't, and it goes into the ether. The harvesting of important digital correspondence remains one of our greatest challenges."

It is often remarked that the short form of Internet lingo, and the ease with which an e-mail can be fired off, has cheapened daily correspondence. One hundred years from now, the archives of today's youth may require the researcher to spend hours scrolling through the histories of Internet-messaging conversations in which the correspondents OMG ROFLMAO (that would be, "Oh my God, roll on the floor, laugh my ass off") themselves through an entire conversation of gossip that has only the slightest chance of pertaining to the work at hand. As Spadoni puts it, "How do you separate the wheat from the chaff?"

However, McKillop feels that these new forms of communication may help a biographer to better harness a sense of character that is otherwise lacking in formal documents. "Most of Berton's actual letters were perfunctory and business-like, even with close author friends," he wrote. "I suspect that a Berton e-mail message would have been less formal, and more illuminating, especially with people like [publisher] Jack McClelland."

As literary icons, Conrad Black and Michael Ignatieff are both in unique positions to comment on the changing nature of biography's sources: Both have written bios on prominent figures, and both are likely to have future biographies written about them.

Black, whose work includes popular books on Maurice Duplessis, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Richard Nixon, is not particularly bothered by whatever impact new technology may have on posterity's handling of his life. "I try to keep e-mails that I think might be of possible interest," he writes in an e-mail. But he believes this interest will be slight: "I doubt if declarations of war will be by text message. Some things will always have to be solemnized to some extent, and even military orders with serious consequences will require to be preserved."

Ignatieff was the official biographer of philosopher Isaiah Berlin, and last week delivered the 2008 Priestley Lectures on his own prominent Canadian relatives. Ignatieff does not consciously archive any digital correspondence. "If any of this material survives, it will make the biographer's task more daunting," he wrote me in an e-mail. "Too much material, too little time, and more importantly, a lot of the ebb and flow of daily life doesn't tell you much about the core of a person's personality. So I'm not sure I envy the biographer of the future."

That's why Luciana Duranti, a professor at the University of British Columbia, takes her work with the InterPARES project seriously. Founded in 1998, it promotes the urgency of effective digital records, working in tandem with libraries, police forces, governments and even local dentist offices. "People have begun to recognize the seriousness of keeping digital records," she says, "because they are now unable to demonstrate where they were on a certain day." In previous decades, people could have referred to an old calendar filed in a drawer. "We look to Churchill's records and now see how important they were. Unfortunately, technology requires us to make choices here and now, when we're not prepared to. What will we pass down to future generations? They will know what we want them to know about us, but not how we really are."

So how do we balance the need to record our stories with the daunting proliferation of useless sources? Will readers still head to source-laden materials, or will they settle for the ever-growing number of Wikipedia summaries?

McKillop feels the detail and slow pace of a biography provide a refreshing alternative to today's iPod culture. "Yet," he says, "it may prove that the very fragmentation of modern life - of knowledge into information, of social values, of the presentation of self, of ideas and values, of personal identity - will make the genre of biography more attractive."

Ignatieff sees it this way: "No TV biography can compete with a great written biography. People still read Boswell's *Life of Johnson* - and I hope they always will."

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