

Research Notes

The Vancouver Island Project: Research, Resources, and Regional Studies

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In a recent book on British Columbia, the editors asserted that “historians still have an awesome task before them. They have only commenced the task of explaining British Columbia’s development as a complex, modern society.”¹ The Vancouver Island Project focuses on one of the basic tasks related to “explaining British Columbia’s development,” and that is general knowledge concerning the extent and availability of primary resources. The V.I.P. is engaged in preparing a unique research tool that can be utilized by researchers in virtually any field, and the principal investigators view the research tool they are preparing as the foundation for a major research project on the development of Vancouver Island. This long-term, substantive study will both complement ongoing historical studies of British Columbia and contribute to one of the richest and most exciting fields of international historiography — the area of regional studies.

The Vancouver Island Project began in September 1982, following months of planning and preliminary survey work.² The V.I.P. is funded by a \$75,000 grant from the Strategic Grants Programme, “Research Tools — Canadian Studies,” of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The Project intends to seek two further renewals of its grant to carry work through to August 1985. The goal of the V.I.P. is to prepare a machine-readable research tool for all public repositories on Vancouver Island (total population, c. 500,000). The

* Members of the History Department, University of Victoria. The Project, as of January 1983, employs a project manager (Margaret Bell) and a researcher (Catherine Panter) on a full-time basis. Graduate students are also employed on an occasional basis during the academic term and on a full-time basis during the summer.

¹ W. P. Ward and R. A. J. McDonald, editors, *British Columbia: Historical Readings* (Vancouver: Douglas and MacIntyre, 1981), p. xi.

² Initial funding for the project was provided by the President of the University of Victoria (\$6,500) and from the B.C. Heritage Trust (\$2,500). We are grateful for this crucial support.

main group of repositories are those of various categories of local government. Thus the research tool will list and describe all the records held by cities (5), district municipalities (8), towns (4), villages (12), school districts (13), regional districts (6), and improvement districts (74). As well, approximately fifty other repositories will be surveyed, including local archives, museums, and historical societies.

The resource tool includes three levels of description. The first level, "The General Guide to Repositories," contains a brief general history of the local government agency or organization, a short administrative history, and basic data such as address, mailing address, hours of service, general physical condition of archival material, adequacy of archival storage facilities, accessibility, etc. This General Guide is intended to be far more detailed than the general entries usually prepared for repositories (most of our general entries will contain 2,500-5,000 words), since the history and organization of local government in British Columbia is virtually a new field of research. Indeed, to enable the Guide to provide detailed and adequate material for users, research on the development of local government on Vancouver Island has been carried out as an independent but complementary project.

Within each repository, records are being described at both the record group and series levels. In preparing record group and series level entries, the V.I.P. is attempting to construct not only a research tool for utilization by anyone interested in the development of Vancouver Island, but also to attain three other important goals of particular interest to the archival, information systems, and research communities. The Project is building upon the MARC Format for archives and manuscript materials recently developed by the Society of American Archivists National Information Systems Task Force.³ The proposal prepared by NISTF in September 1982 has been adapted to the Project's needs, following consultation with many professional archivists and after much experimentation in the field. As of January 1982, however, we believe we have a format that will serve us well through to the completion of the Project.

In addition to seeking out, identifying, and annotating primary source material on Vancouver Island that has hitherto been ignored by archivists and researchers, and adopting standard definitions of archival description elements, the V.I.P. has a further goal. The Project's annotated

³ The Task Force has prepared and distributed numerous papers. A concise statement of their work can be found in David Bearman, "Toward National Information Systems for Archives and Manuscript Repositories," *The American Archivist*, Vol. 45 (1982), pp. 53-56.

entries will be designated for on-line searching as well as hard copy reporting. In developing this computer application, the V.I.P. is building on achievements elsewhere, especially in the United States where funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities has led to computer-based research tools involving inventories, catalogues, concordances, and so forth. The specific work which is most relevant to the V.I.P. has been carried out by the Washington State Archival Survey under the leadership of John F. Burns.⁴ In order to create a machine-readable resource tool, the V.I.P. has developed a comprehensive survey form with appropriate field definitions and a format for internal use and for compatibility with other institutions and projects.

The Project's fourth objective concerns the relationship between current methodologies in history and current record keeping practices. As F. M. Miller has recently argued, modern historical methods present "a special challenge" to archivists.⁵ The V.I.P. responds to one aspect of the challenge by systematically canvassing the records of historical societies, museums, churches and businesses. The result will be a research tool composed of those sources that provide the most direct *entrée* into the behaviour and *mentalité* of local society.

In many respects, the V.I.P. is on the frontier of archival surveying in Canada. A few initiatives have been taken in this area by the Public Archives of Canada, the Archives nationales du Québec, and the Provincial Archives of British Columbia. Also, at the 1982 Kingston Conference on Archives, the Bureau of Canadian Archivists was requested to establish a working group to develop national standards for the arrangement and description of archives. The "Archival Descriptive Standards Project" is currently seeking funding for its work.⁶ In all these cases, however, efforts deal with major national or provincial repositories and only in Quebec has work progressed beyond the study stage. To our

⁴ See John F. Burns, "Statewide Surveying: Some Lessons Learned," *The American Archivist*, Vol. 42 (1979), pp. 295-300. The Washington State Project has also published the following: D. Hastings and T. Eckert, eds., *Historical Records in Washington State: Guide to Records in State Archives and its Regional Repositories*, and T. Eckert and L. Stark, eds., *Historical Records of Washington State: Records and Papers Held at Repositories* (Ellensburg, Washington: Washington State Historical Records and Archives Project, 1981).

⁵ F. M. Miller, "Social History and Archival Practice," *The American Archivist*, Vol. 44 (1981), pp. 113-124. See also Kent M. Haworth, "Local Archives: Responsibilities and Challenges for Archivists," *Archivaria*, No. 3 (Winter 1976-77), pp. 28-39.

⁶ Information on this project was provided by Terry Eastwood, Director, Archival Studies Programme, University of British Columbia.

knowledge, no other project in Canada is preparing a research tool for repositories that are often unorganized and in which the care of historical records is not a principal mission. In the repositories to be surveyed by the V.I.P., historical records are usually the responsibility of one employee and frequently of either part-time or voluntary workers.

As we proceed, we would welcome inquiries and comments from those interested in the area of local government records and comprehensive surveying. At this stage, we are especially interested in the issues surrounding subject access to records. Please address your inquiries or comments to one of the principal investigators, c/o Vancouver Island Project, University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C., Canada v8w 2Y2.