

## Our Cultural Heritage and Its Main Protagonists – Libraries and Archives, a Comparative Study

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### INTRODUCTION

The very notion of a ‘cultural heritage’ needs to be considered. During one of my first years as National Librarian and Head of the Royal Library in Stockholm I came across a museum director who put forth an insistent case as to why libraries could never be considered safekeeping institutions to our cultural heritage, nor would he concede archives this privilege. He maintained that museums - because of their object orientated collections - were the very definition of true guardianship and representative of our cultural heritage. This point of view made me thoughtful and slightly bewildered, but also that it was quite apparent to what extent and low status museums ascribe the written word. Over the years the notion of a cultural heritage has established itself in the general public’s mind and come to encompass, strictly speaking, all expressions of human activity inherent within a historical dimension.

In my present position I am often given to read newspaper cuttings from all parts of the country on the theme of archives, libraries and so forth. Judging from these, there are numerous national archives and national libraries responsible for our cultural heritage in the areas of, for instance, design, photography, folk-music and textiles. The very word cultural heritage possesses an exceptional emotive force, with which a number of institutions, in the earnestness of their daily endeavours, wish to assimilate. Add an adjective such as ‘National’ to these institutions, then so much the better. A glance in our National Encyclopaedia fails to enlighten us in the matter as there is no access-point to this particular entry. And one would be wise not to aim for too wide a definition. It should simply be enough to establish that it is about an obligation we share, that of caring for and putting to use the knowledge, experiences and artistic expressions - a cultural heritage - as it has developed throughout history until today.

Much mention is made of collaborative ventures across the various public sectors, meaning the sectors of museums-libraries-archives (MLA, or its Swedish abbreviation: ABM). A former colleague of mine was of the opinion that it had become a mantra of sorts after hearing numerous lecturers emphasising the positive nature of collaborative MLA ventures. In the long run he felt it became tedious just listening to them. No one

ever seemed to want to discuss what this collaboration was to be about, only that it needed to exist. His opinion was that its structure had assumed greater importance than its contents. There is also an international tendency to view the different cultural institutions in a wider perspective. The recent policy frames of the European Union have made it clear that they wish to see such tendencies evolve. Since last year Norway gained a new public authority entitled ABM-utvikling, a few years ago the United Kingdom established the public authority: Resources (which thankfully changed its name to the more intelligible acronym: MLA - Museums, Libraries and Archives Council), in Canada they simplified the matter by merging the National Library with the National Archives and so on. In Sweden we have chosen a more cautious approach. On a regional level MLA-coordinators have been recruited, a line of action, which unfortunately, lacks a national and centralised counterpart. A board of consultants exists at an informal level since the early 1990's; although they have yet to establish a firm basis. But, this collaborative venture is about to be formalised and from May 1, 2004 Sweden's major cultural institutions mutually initiated the embryo of a secretariat.

### **A HISTORY IN COMMON**

The libraries and archival institutions of Sweden have benefited from a long and joint history of close collaborative ventures, and have on occasion been merged. Until 1877 the National Archives, the Royal Library and the Royal Art Collections were part of the Royal Chancellery. Following this there was a division of the joint property. For centuries the major libraries functioned as important archives. The collections of archival material found at the university libraries in Lund, Uppsala and the Royal Library are immense and derive mainly from individual archive workers, associations, enterprises, whilst the National Archives and the Regional Archives (from the beginning of the last century) have been responsible for the archives of government authorities, courts of law, government measures etc. The largest of archives also have their own libraries to assist their researchers, very much like the research libraries. By now a somewhat inflationary description as 'scholarly institutions' was once intended to describe the roles of the National Archives, the Royal Library and the Central Board of National Antiquities as miniature universities where research and research information were and are closely integrated. In other words, there exists a natural bond and by tradition a well defined adjacent collaboration between archives and libraries. The archives that are part of libraries make, by and large, use of the same principles when registering material as other archives, and the libraries found at archives catalogue along the same principles as libraries in general.

There is currently a need to see institutions as part of a wider context. The new technology whereby scanning of documents and images (moving or still), photographs, music, produces information in its smallest components of ones and zeros and can therefore be seen as independent from any kind of media. In other words we have mutual

problems with regard to collecting, long term preservation of the material and its availability.

This might be a slightly premature statement on my behalf and I now intend to step back a few paces and consider the similarities and the dissimilarities at closer range. Some years ago, archivists of some repute wrote an article in which the introduction conveyed a sense of despair, claiming that "Everyone knows about libraries, but no one knows about archives". From one point of view it presents us with a fairly accurate picture as to how the archives view their situation. There is a comparatively low sense of self esteem among them, in which they cling to an illusion that libraries are so much better at self promotion and getting their message across and librarians as being a pushy breed blessed with a talent for PR. Considering this with library-tinted glasses on, I am certain that a librarian would fail to recognise this at all. His or her self-perception also contains self-deception, low self-esteem and deliberations as to why the world fails to appreciate their efforts.

## REGULATIONS

Archives have a serious problem with the word: archive-work. This may in part be blamed on the globally severe economic fluctuations during the 1930's. Unemployment stood at an all time high when public authorities permitted a large number of the unemployed to find themselves in positions performing archive-work, in other words, simpler forms of clerical work. And this conception lived on well into the last century. When I begun my library career in 1971 the libraries were full of archive workers who lacked adequate qualification for the job. They were given all sorts of tasks, the kind that was seldom given priority by the management. As late as 1996 when the Government discussed whether to allow archives access to *SUNET* alongside the libraries, the then Under-Secretary of State at the Ministry of Education Göran Löfdahl showed hesitation when exclaiming "But archives are so booooring". Personally, I feel we are, in a joint effort, about to rid ourselves of this mark of boorishness. Even the mass media have eased up on the stereotypes of us as spinsters or walking about with our lapels covered in dandruff. Latter-day literature has descriptions of intense meetings between archivists and librarians and we all know what can take place between archive shelves...

It feels strange that it has taken such a turn considering the archives exceptionally proud tradition and position of importance, which they have upheld toward the nation and its citizens. One of the archival world's main spokesmen for an open society, Claes Gränström proposed only a year ago the purpose and meaning of archives in society as being: "of such a kind that a state governed by law can barely function, its confidence held by the public barely maintained or satisfy the needs of research and cultural aspects, if the authorities through an unregulated and arbitrary manner (can) barely function and on capricious foundations dispose of documents". When glancing around the National

Archives boardroom I am quick to notice, to my dismay, that all my predecessors since 1618 have all, nearly without exception, either been celebrities, professors, ministers or members of academies. Archives stand, contrary to the public library system, on a strong foundation of laws and statutes. These are regulated in a strict manner informing public authorities as to how documents should be handled, their wording and storage, which material is to be used and they even inform how the storage place should be equipped in order to meet required standards. Archives are also under an obligation to see to it that these regulations are followed and to write reports if any shortcomings or discrepancies are discovered.

Libraries have a far weaker foundation to stand upon. The Library Act merely states that there should be libraries in each municipality and that book loans must be free of charge. The paragraph found in the university statute lacks all qualitative elements. So, comparatively speaking, archives find themselves settled on a solid foundation. Knowing this, it is nevertheless unnerving that the frail sense of self perception displayed by the archives so blatantly contradicts reality. Archives are an essential prerequisite in a democratic society.

## **COLLABORATION**

What libraries and archives have in common is the understanding of the usefulness of collaboration on a national and international scale. There is a lot to be gained in using the same standards and principles when registering, irregardless if one is in Sweden or Australia. Libraries made an early start in seeking standards when describing books and classifying information. By adhering to this it was possible to exchange information across borders and it was sufficient to catalogue a book only once. Libraries could thereafter purchase this piece of information and make the requisite amendments to the record. Technological advances became an assertive support and tool in this process. The initially heavily criticised automated cataloguing collaboration in the Swedish national database LIBRIS came to be as early as 1971/72. In other words, it took place during the very infancy of computer technology. The advantage of getting a head start was that the first automated lending system could be put into use in the early 1980's (a necessary requirement enabling the libraries to cope with the increased lending rate was to follow in the wake of the expansion of the higher education system in the 1990's). The archival institutions were late to adapt the new technology to their own administrative needs. The complexes of problems also differed with regard to archives. The lack of regulations among the archives, compared to libraries, was an incitement to a more exclusive collaborative effort regarding registering. The collections needed to be catalogued differently due to natural circumstances. Archives still lack a truly efficient lending system to correspond with those of libraries. And yet there are categories of material found at the archives, which are well suited for collaborative standardisation measures. The objects that come to mind are items such as illustrated wall charts,

illustrations, photographs and sound recordings. And, as I mentioned earlier, to the extent where documents are electronic the differences between these types of information cease to exist between various categories of media.

Within the European Union there is an increase in collaborative ventures among libraries and archives. To briefly summarise: on the library side it involves the establishing of a European virtual library (TEL). The information retrieved in a library system should be made available wherever one may be in the union. Among the archives it aims to intensify networking, the harmonisation and co-ordination of digitisation projects regarding our cultural heritage and the long term preservation of digital consignments. Collaboration is of importance.

## **DEPARTMENTAL GROWING PAINS**

What came to my immediate surprise as a newly appointed Director General of the National Archives was the rapid expansion taking place at the Swedish State archives. There was an expansion not only at the various public authorities, but also at the Archive Department and in the form of electronic documents. The libraries are crowded most of the time. Those responsible often have to apply ad hoc solutions and if one enters a slightly older municipal library in an average sized Swedish town, the impression will no doubt be that every available bit of space is filled with books. One of my most memorable study visits was to the old public library in Visby, on the island of Gotland, which barely had room for anyone to sit down to study or enjoy some recreational reading. Every square metre was occupied with books. I therefore have some experience when it comes to dealing with problems related to the logistics of premises. But the situation within the Swedish State Archives is something out of the ordinary. In 2003 the Archives Department (RA, KrA and LA) expanded by 27,000 shelf metres, which is to be compared to the Royal library's approximately 1200 shelf metres and the approximate estimation of the major university libraries at 1000 shelf metres. Simultaneously, the number of visitors to the research libraries is far greater. The Royal Library has a daily average rate of 800 visitors and the other research libraries average somewhere between 3000 and 10,000 visitors per day. The National Archives have approximately 200 visitors each day and the Regional Archives receive about 50 each day. Adding it all up, we can see that approximately approximately 100,000 people per year visit the entire Archives Departments. This is much the same amount of visitors to the Royal Library. Or, one could put it differently and say that the Archives Department receives an exceptional amount of documents used by relatively few people. On the other hand, the libraries have a large number of people visiting them, but compared to the archives use very little of the material. Nevertheless, when comparing such differences one must be aware of their assignments. The archives cater to the citizen's constitutional right to partake in official records, and the libraries cater to safeguard free thought and the right of expression.

If we care to take a closer look at the users, certain similarities will appear. There are obvious discernible user categories, which leave their undeniable mark in the daily activities of each cultural heritage area. The users of research libraries today are mainly made up of students who either use the library as a place for study at an early stage in their education, alternatively when they are on the 60 to 80 credits level. At the University of Stockholm the students made up for 90% of all visitors. An essay written, by the then soon to be appointed Head of the Stockholm University Library and present-day National Librarian Gunnar Sahlin, in 1992 which appeared in a commemorative book and tellingly enough titled - *The Students Library*. At the Royal Library the visitor is of a different kind. The most prominent being postgraduate students. Aside from that, the percentage rate for Stockholm University is equally applicable to other research libraries. The most frequent visitors to the archives are genealogists, a group who are in a clear majority. At the Regional Archives this particular group can make up as much as 95% of all visitors during a day. Just like the Royal Library, The National Archives in Marieberg does, however, deviate from this pattern – most of whom are academics.

Obviously one may consider whether these 27,000 shelf metres are representative of the public sector. Many have questioned if the public are given a fair description of the public sector by having access to those official documents, which are drawn up. Is not the case rather that what is of most interest in a decision-making process is never printed and therefore never available for scrutiny? This discussion is reminiscent of the one regarding libraries who are criticised for not purchasing the correct kind of literature. Why did you buy this rubbishy book when you chose to turn down a much better book? Or: all libraries insist on buying according to a mainstream plan and thereby bypass what is truly original and offbeat. Does the acquisitions policy really reflect the supply?

I do not intend to carry this debate any further, merely to state that there is a noticeable expansion going on within our archives compared to those of the libraries. In the longer view this might be an untenable situation. The institutions safeguarding our cultural heritage are made to accommodate growth, but to what extent? Some feel that technology will come to our rescue. To those I would like to say the following: this is what the libraries believed ten years ago and still the same amount of printed matter is issued each year. The barely discernible decrease that can occasionally be gleaned in one subject area of documentation is countered by the increase in another. The many electronic documents collected under, among other things, the Royal Library's web-projects are an addition to everything else.

## **THE CENTRE AND ITS PERIPHERY**

I don't know whether this applies to other countries, but if one considers the developments within the Archives Department over the last years it is easy to form the opinion that the guiding forces have been political and regional measures and not archive

policies. It has been the shutting down of military regiments and industries that have set the pace for development and seldom the need for competence. Many of the new ventures and creative measures have taken place outside our major cities, whether it is Stockholm, Göteborg, Lund or Malmö. In my gloomier thoughts I sometimes believe that politicians feel that archival matters are best handled outside the areas that have the largest populations. Sparsely-populated areas appear to be conducive in acquiring archival skills. Archives need not be in places where the demand for them is the greatest.

There might be some truth in this statement, especially if one considers the new technology whereby the availability of digital documents is not dependant on geographical distance. Far from all documents are of such a nature. A consequence of the kind of policies mentioned is that we now have to struggle with a fragmented picture, where keeping it together and creating the necessary critical mass to generate the right kind of expertise. Soon, every place marked on a map will feel entitled to their share of the 'archive cake'.

The libraries have consistently taken another approach. Here the aim has been to control developmental strides, as I wrote in the article "Do we need the National Libraries" in 2003. Most developmental work has either taken place in projects, such as is the case regarding digital legal deposits or at the major institutions themselves in Lund, Uppsala, and Stockholm or at the Royal Library. This attitude has backlashed unto itself as the digitisation of crucial parts of the collections has been given low-level priority. Libraries have maintained a doubtful approach due to risks pertaining to long delivery schedules and numerous re-packaging of fragile material. The archives have accepted the terms stated by regional policy plans and enabled the digitisation of several major archives.

It will therefore be interesting to observe the rectification of borderlines in creating nation-wide plans for the cultural heritage as a result of the extensive measures that have been recommended. This will be the arena where the two 'ideologies' will meet, and the odds are that the libraries will have to give way.

### **IS HISTORY ALIVE?**

Interest in our history is on the rise in Sweden. An old statement was recently (March 2004) invested with new urgency as the Minister of Education pronounced the stabilisation of history as a major subject at upper secondary school education. This is a significant step forward. To strengthen this interest in history throughout the country, a new public authority was established: *The Stockholm International Forum*. The Prime Minister, Göran Persson, played a significant part. There are a number of examples underlining the fact that this trend has also reached the writers of popular science as well as the professional historians and the higher echelons of the political establishment. As a consequence we also see an increase in interest for those institutions that preserve and

remember our history. But, there is a clear line of distinction that runs between libraries and archives. The archives have at all times possessed a dynamic and rich relationship to the science of history and its practitioners. Historians and their peers have gone in and out of archives, one day as historians and the next as administrators of the archives in charge of various matters. The exchange has been mutual. It has brought upon the archives an exceptional sense of care, intimate and loving, with regard to the collections. This has, for instance, prepared them for the veritable explosion of genealogists.

At research libraries development has been quite the opposite. When I outlined my vision for the Royal Library in 1997, it was based on the observation that the increased interest in history would also involve an increased commitment to its historical collections. This vision might have been applicable to the Royal Library, though hardly to any of the other research libraries. When entering the Stockholm University Library as its General Director in the winter of 1991/92, I was relatively speaking, alone in my appreciation of the older collections. Of course, there were a few librarians who shared my interest, but on the whole the older collections were seen as a nonentity or as nothing less than a burden. This general attitude was still dominant even as I resigned as National Librarian last year.

There are a number of explanations for this phenomenon. The first - and easiest - is to turn our attention to the changed financial budgets applied to higher education in 1977. Because of this, research libraries ceased being self-contained public authorities and have thereafter received their funding from their mother-institution/university. The cultural values previously represented by the library sector eventually became downsized and the necessary funds needed for the care of the older collections was undermined to the advantage of higher priority areas. The second explanation is to be found in the intense work schedules of librarians, where the winds of changes have been most obvious during the last two decades. All effort has been invested to keep pace with technical developments. Technology would solve all our problems, or at least so one thought, and therefore research libraries centred all their resources of competence to develop and maintain systems-development, networks, web-data and recently the immense digital databases for periodicals presently evolving. This has all been good and well, but I would like to hold forth that libraries have, in the process, lost their sense of place in history. Rescue has always come in the form of outside funding sources, which have stepped in and financed certain crucial initiatives within the library-sector.

I find it amusing to note that presently a reversal is taking place in the archival sector. Developments here remind me of how libraries reasoned 10 years ago. Connecting with the development of the public administration toward a form of e-government, electronic administration, the archives organisation will evolve toward that which has been so obvious in the library sector since the 1990's. In the same way as libraries handle electronic documents as any other media-category; so also the archives today look longingly to what the electronic administration might produce with regard to the view on official documents and their preservation and availability. But let us not fall into the

same historical trap as did the research libraries. Janus looks forward as well as backward.

To sum up, I would like to say that when I made the change from National Librarian to Director-General of the National Archives I never really considered that there would be that much of a difference. I was wrong. The organisations are very different from one another. The National Archives have a regional dimension, which the Royal Library suffers a complete lack of; the corporate image differs; priorities lay in different fields, and the competence of its employees cannot always be compared. However, fundamentally there are several similarities. There is a great measure of idealism in both sectors, their staff is dedicated and loyal, and democratic ideals are very much alive. There is today a mutually held opinion that the user should be at the centre of attention and much effort is made to accommodate the visitor or researcher. In such areas as, say, separate archives the routines are identical and seeing how the electronic administration is barging into the archives sector it appears that they are facing the same fate that was afflicted the libraries with regard to electronic publications and electronic legal deposits. I therefore see similarities between the two as being even more apparent in the future.

#### **WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT**

ABM-utvikling. Statens senter for Arkiv, Bibliotek og Museum. <http://www.abm-utvikling.no/>

MLA - Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. <http://www.mla.gov.uk/index.asp>

National Archives of Sweden. <http://www.ra.se/en/>

Regional Archives of Sweden. <http://www.ra.se/la.html>

Royal Library. National Library of Sweden. <http://www.kb.se/ENG/kbstart.htm>

TEL - The European Library. The Gate to Europe's knowledge  
<http://www.europeanlibrary.org/>