

The Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions: 25 Years of Preserving and Providing Access to Canada's Printed Heritage

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This year the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (CIHM) is celebrating 25 years of preserving and providing access to 350 years of early Canadian printed publications. How did this small, non-profit organization build the largest single collection of early Canadiana?

Launched in 1978 by the Canada Council in response to recommendations by the Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies, entitled *To Know Ourselves* (also called the Symons Report after author Thomas Symons), and the Report of the Consultative Group on University Research Libraries, CIHM was charged with preserving Canada's printed heritage and facilitating and increasing its availability so that scholars could carry out serious research in the absence of large collections of original material.

CIHM has been a successful and increasingly independent enterprise, which has undertaken this challenging task with the tremendous support of libraries, archives, scholars and researchers across Canada. The initial project involved 5,000 titles. By the late 1990s the Early

Canadiana Research Collection had grown to over 90,000 titles on more than 270,000 microfiche. More than 200 libraries, archives and private sources in Canada and abroad have generously lent their materials for filming.

Rare and fragile publications, which had formerly been virtually inaccessible, are now preserved as a national collection. Eighty-five institutions around the world own part or all of the collection, including 38 Canadian research libraries. In Canada alone, the collection serves over 100,000 users each year. A number of detailed bibliographies, reflecting microfiche subject sets, have been produced as well.

Technology has played a major role in shaping CIHM operations and products. When the Institute began operations, microfiche was deemed to be the best distribution medium. Over the years, CIHM continued to embrace technological change, including networked PCs, Internet access and digitization. As improvements to operations and products went up, staffing numbers went down. The biggest single change occurred with the transition

from microfiche to online product. Subscribing libraries no longer had to wait for periodic releases of catalogue records and microfiche shipments and the filing and storing that accompanied such a product. Digital files are accessible as soon as loaded and via the entire text (full-text searching through OCR).

Among the first such large-scale digital projects undertaken, CIHM's Early Canadiana Online (ECO), released in the spring of 1999 with about 3,000 titles, moved our printed heritage from within the confines of the traditional library onto the Internet at www.canadiana.org. ECO was an instant success, with over eight million hits received in the first year. ECO has now doubled in size, and usage continues to rise, averaging over two million hits per month. More than 15,000 pages are read daily.

The primarily academic and research audience of ECO has expanded over the years to include large numbers from the general public, particularly those interested in genealogy and local history. Public access to the entire database is free through subscribing institutions.

In addition, about half of the ECO database is free to anyone anywhere with a PC and Internet connection.

Having successfully completed the pilot project, CIHM is now in year four of the five-year *Canada in the Making* project. A comprehensive historical collection of original government publications, English and French, from the first colonial governments through Confederation and up to 1900 will be located, preserved and made available over the Internet through ECO. A total of 1.25 million pages!

In addition, CIHM has released three educational resources: *Lesson Plans*, the *Canada in the Making* resource site, and *Exploration, the Fur Trade and Hudson's Bay Company* resource site. Neither microfiche nor print would appeal to today's cyber kids who have no difficulty surfing Early Canadiana Online. They also enjoy web-based learning resources. The preference for online information combined with the emphasis placed on using original sources in education has brought a new user group to ECO. Since free access to the entire database for Canadian elementary and high schools was announced in July 2002, more than 900 schools have registered.

Regular assessments and evaluations are integral to CIHM's operations and are carried out for both content (selection) and delivery (microfiche standards; ECO database and user interface). The relationship of CIHM to its stakeholders is unique. Unlike subscribers to commercial databases, CIHM subscribers not

only receive the products, they direct their development. They do this by participating as members of the Board of Directors and/or as members of the various advisory committees. A complete list of all committees is on the CIHM web site at www.nlc-bnc.ca/cihm/cihmbrd.htm.

CIHM's three main sources of support have been the research community's purchase of microfiche, the National Library of Canada's financial as well as in-kind support, and various government grants, particularly from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Instead of easing the financial strain, going online has necessitated finding new sources of revenue. Fundraising efforts, begun several years ago, with the launch of ECO have resulted in additional financial support from private and corporate donors.

The Mellon Foundation provided half a million dollars toward the ECO pilot, which was matched with funds from other sponsors. Some sponsors directed their support to particular parts of the collection such as the Hannah Institute (medicine microfiche collection) and the Vancouver Foundation (microfiche subset of B.C. titles). Some directed their funds toward the development of the web-based educational resources, such as the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation (*Canada in the Making*), the Harold Crabtree Foundation, Histor!ca Foundation, and Hudson's Bay History Foundation (*Exploration, the Fur Trade and Hudson's Bay*

Company). Recently Canadian Heritage has added its support through the Canadian Culture Online program.

A complete list of all partners since the ECO launch and ECO subscribing institutions is on the ECO web site at www.canadiana.org/eco/english/partners.html.

Despite financial difficulties over the years, including almost ceasing operations on a couple of occasions, CIHM has managed to build a formidable collection utilizing economies of scale in this unique partnership model. As long as there is support, the Early Canadiana Research Collection will continue to grow. CIHM looks optimistically toward the next 25 years as it plans the next project: the digitization of *Early Canadian Periodicals to 1920*. 🍁

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