

In-House Conservation and the General Practice of Archival Science

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This is an age of specialization. We must specialize, we are told, for we cannot hope to be widely proficient, even in our own areas of professional study and practice. It has become fashionable as well as lucrative to be a specialist, which is no small pull in that direction. Is specialization a luxury that can be afforded in the field of archival science? I contend that for many archives it is, particularly in areas such as conservation. Archives of business, medical organizations, historical societies, and others with limited staffs and budgets, simply do not have the funding to employ professional conservators for the great amount of work that needs to be done. The choice they face seems to be between training their staff for in-house conservation work and permitting the unabated deterioration of their holdings.

The Society of American Archivists in March of 1980 published a survey in the *SAA Newsletter*, entitled, "Eyeing the Eighties." Of the ten issues deemed to be the most significant by the professionals who returned the survey, 61 per cent remarked that scarce resources would be the bane of archivists in the 1980s. There is no indication yet that this judgement is untrue. Twenty-five per cent cited conservation to be an approaching problem of formidable dimensions. The *Newsletter* said, "There will be more and more call for conservation expertise and not enough archivists willing or able to fill this need." It encouraged the SAA to offer courses for and by archivists and lamented the lack of interest in conservation by directors of archives.

The paucity of financial resources to sponsor conservation programmes under the care of professional conservators, and the lack of widespread interest still add up to a good deal of inertia and too little action on the part of archival administrators. There is, however, a growing concern for more preservation education than had been the case in the past.

George and Dorothy Cunha point out in their significant recent book, *Library and Archives Conservation: The 1980's and Beyond* (1980), that although archivists are generally more aware and increasingly active in the field of preservation, there is still far too little in the way of restoration being undertaken compared to the immense need. A contributing factor here may very well be the lack of funding for practical conservation projects by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission as they struggle to keep existing programmes afloat. In 1978 the *Annual Report* of the NHPRC stated:

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The Commission believes that not all records, even those which contain information of substantial continuing value to society, can be retained in their original form. Given the volume of paper records of archival value and the facilities and personnel necessary to provide for their preservation, selective restoration and continued administration, alternatives to present practices must be found. Records administrators must seek cooperative and cost effective solutions to their related problems which are too large to be dealt with by individual programs. State, regional, or other area wide conservation programs offer a potential, although partial solution. Programs that attach highest importance to the information in records rather than to the records themselves are desirable in many cases, although the artifact value of some selected records will continue to justify retention. The Commission also believes that the refinement and further development of microform and other copying programs can provide an effective and economical way to preserve and make accessible the information in many records.¹

Since the earliest days of the archival profession, there has been an ambivalent attitude towards conservation by archivists. To paraphrase the words of Sir Winston Churchill, it is as though conservation was a great riddle wrapped in an enigma. Muller, Fieth, and Fruin ignore conservation entirely in their classic manual published in 1894. One can virtually feel the mystified silence in the room in the Palais des Congrès in Brussels in 1910, when the First International Congress of Librarians and Archivists heard Dr. M. Schroengen, State Archivist of the Province of Overijssel, at Zwolle in Holland, expound on the repair of manuscript materials with the use of Zapon, "a preservative consisting of a solution of nitrocellulose, (gun cotton), with or without the addition of camphor in acetate of amyl, to which a small amount of acetone has been added to increase solubility."² It was all alchemy anyway, and Dr. Schroengen, an archivist it is true, had somehow strayed from arrangement and description to pure science and left everyone else quite far behind.

There were other archivists in the profession's early days who believed that, "hands-on" conservation was not only a professional duty, but an absolutely necessary skill. Sir Hilary Jenkinson, no mean document restorer himself, in his 1922 manual, assumed that conservation was part of the essential equipment of the archivist whose duty it was to hand on to future generations, documents with no diminution in their evidential value. Many pages of what he calls "The Physical Defense of Archives" are devoted to detailed explanations of the techniques of conservation practised in his day. He states:

In general, it is to be observed that anyone who is neat fingered in the ordinary affairs of life can, if he or she chooses to give the necessary time to practicing, make a reasonably good repairer. Such a one may be advised, once he or she has mastered the first principles, to watch, if possible, a skilled repairer at work — at any rate, to examine closely, a properly repaired document, and to then accumulate a small kit and some valueless fragments

1 *A Report to the President by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission*, (Washington, 1978), pp. 21-22.

2 A.J.F. Van Laer, "The Work of the International Congress of Archivists and Librarians at Brussels, August 28-31, 1910," *American Historical Association, Annual Report*, (Washington, 1910).

of documents, (if possible of varying date and character), and set out to gain practical experience. It is wise to begin with paper rather than parchment.³

This sound advice heralds what George Cunha continues to say to the profession.

In New York in 1909, Waldo Gifford Leland presented a paper entitled "American Archival Problems" to the First Annual Conference of Archivists held under the auspices of the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association. He advocated the preparation of an American archival manual patterned upon the classic Dutch text. Of the twenty sections of the projected American manual section fourteen ("Binding, Repair, and Restoration") and section fifteen ("Stationery, Record Paper, Record Inks and Typewriter Ribbon Standards") indicate that it was Leland's opinion, as it was Jenkinson's, that "in-house" or "hands-on" conservation would be one of the areas in which American archivists were expected to be proficient.⁴

In 1943 Adelaide Minogue, then Acting Chief of the Division of Repair and Preservation at the National Archives and Records Service, published her pamphlet, *The Repair and Preservation of Records*. In her introduction she wrote, "The purpose of this bulletin is to meet the needs of archivists and custodians of manuscripts for a practical handbook based upon the most recent scientific investigations in the field of records preservation. The more modern repair methods, and older ones of value as well, are described in such detail that an interested person will be able to carry out necessary repairs on his records without professional assistance." (p. 5) A careful reading of her manual combined with Jenkinson's suggestions was supposed to allow the archivist to take care of many conservation problems. Although there are some sections of Miss Minogue's work that are now outdated, and deacidification treatment methods as they have developed in the postwar years were still in their infancy in William J. Barrow's Virginia laboratory, there are still some professional conservators who are willing to go no further with the use of chemicals and solvents than Miss Minogue and, in some cases, even less so. Her work still remains useful in many of its essentials and can safely be relied upon.

Margaret Cross Norton's collection of essays published in the *Illinois Libraries* journal and in other sources demonstrates her knowledge of the physical characteristics of paper. (The late Ernst Posner once suggested that if these essays were systematically organized they could serve as the first American manual of archives administration.) See, for example, her essay entitled, "The Handling and Repair of Fragile Documents."⁵

Despite such eloquent statements from eminent archivists in the past about the need to train in the field of "hands-on" conservation little has been done. Yet, the need has never been as great as it is now nor have the resources for study of conservation methods by the scholarly archivist been as readily available. George and Dorothy Cunha have offered the profession a completely annotated bibliography of almost eleven thousand works in all areas of conservation. It is an exceptionally valuable resource. However, if the past is any guide, a great deal of persuasion within the profession needs to be done. Archivists still do

3 Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archives Administration* (London, 1966), pp. 67-68. Reissue of the 1922 Edition.

4 Victor Hugo Palsits, "A Plan and Scope of 'Manual of Archive Economy for the Use of American Archivists,'" American Historical Association, *Annual Report*, (Washington, 1912), p. 254.

5 Thornton W. Mitchell, ed., *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival Records Management* (Chicago, 1975).

little beyond providing conservation palliatives such as correct temperature and light controls and good housekeeping. The present state of affairs in the area of conservation is summed up by one conservation administrator who had had a multi-year tour of duty with a large university library. The person states in a recently published manual, "I have spent the past several years studying the needs of small libraries, public, special, and academic ... I will not tell a librarian how to repair anything, better that be left to a trained conservator. Rather it [referring to the manual] discusses collection maintenance, ranging from good housekeeping to the installation of environmental controls."⁶ It would seem to be better for conservation administrators to train in the area of "hands-on" conservation and thereby help to alleviate the problems that collection maintenance will never cure. The best air conditioners, the finest in archival storage products, and the cleanest shelves will never be a substitute for the basic treatments for acid hydrolysis that infects countless documents in archives in all countries.

It has also become apparent that funds needed to send the mass of decaying archives that should be preserved in their original form to regional conservation centres is not forthcoming. Funding for such purposes simply is not there. In addition, there does not seem to be a willingness by administrators to add more professionals to archives staff of late.

Archivists have avoided the conservation field from the practical standpoint of working in it not because they are remiss in performance of their collective responsibilities, but rather because they feel that responsibility keenly. Archivists know that they are simply not research scientists or chemists. They also believe that they lack the theoretical knowledge which should underlie practical conservation procedures. In other words as one critic of "in-house" conservation has stated, and which George Cunha has, with gentlemanly grace included in his book, " 'In-House' conservation may well turn out to be 'Out-House' conservation."⁷

In the archival field, however, many of us do not have the luxury of being specialists. Many do not work in highly diversified institutions with large departmentalized staffs concentrating upon specific functions. In many cases, to use an apt metaphor employed by Edward C. Oetting and Sister Ann Brawley at the SAA Annual General Meeting at Boston in 1982, we are "Lone Arrangers." In other words, we are engaged in the general practice of archival science. As such, we deal with all archival functions: arrangement and description, reference and access, appraisal and accessioning, reprography, publication, education, public relations, exhibitions, preservation and conservation, and a host of other functions.

As with the medical practitioner of a former day (and, happily, increasingly again today), we must be prepared to handle all situations in which our practice places us, including conservation. At the same time, as the best medical general practice physician knows, the archivist is involved in primary care and must recognize the need for the specialist when the time arises. Few medical men in general practice are research scientists. Most know of the latest discoveries of medical science by reading the medical journals and attending short courses, lectures, and seminars which may introduce them to the niceties of new techniques and knowledge. The archivist is, or should be, no different in this sense from the general practice physician.

6 Susan G. Swartzberg, *Preserving Library Materials: A Manual* (Metuchen, N.J., 1980), p. ix.

7 Cunha and Cunha, *Library and Archives Conservation*, p. 107.

If one reads the Cunhas, Minogue, H.J. Plenderleith and A.E.A. Warner, and many others carefully, and accepts the advice of Jenkinson, one can become sufficiently familiar with conservation theory and practice to engage in "in-house" conservation.⁸ The archivist will also know how far he or she can safely go in testing for solubility, in the removal of pressure sensitive tapes, in wet and dry cleaning, in deacidification procedures, in the choice of the correct solvents, in leaf casting repairs, and nylon gossamer web reinforcement. The archivist must also know when to call the conservator in for consultation and to refer problems that cannot and should not be treated "in-house."

Professional societies such as the Society of American Archivists, the Association of Canadian Archivists, regional archival societies, and cooperating conservation agencies must increasingly expand their educational functions with a major commitment to upgrading professional standards. The SAA has taken great steps in recent years in the area of conservation education, particularly in "hands-on" conservation procedures taught at workshops in various parts of the United States. With more funding for this type of educational programme, and more commitment to it the SAA could play a major role in preparing practising archivists to handle more conservation problems that are found in American archives. These institutions, what they are doing now, and what they could be doing in the future in the field of "hands-on" conservation education could, to paraphrase the words of the historian Carl Becker, make every man his own conservator. To quote George and Dorothy Cunha, "Waiting for the conservator in most libraries is like waiting for Godot."⁹

It behooves those professional archivists engaged in the general practice of archival science to take steps to preserve the mass of archives that surely will never come to the conservator's bench.

8 H.J. Plenderleith and A.E.A. Warner, *The Conservation of Antiquities and Works of Art: Treatment, Repair and Restoration* (Oxford, 1976).

9 Cunha and Cunha, *Library and Archives Conservation*, p. 118.