

## *Book Reviews*

**The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information: A RAMP Study with Guidelines.** TERRY COOK. Paris: Unesco General Information Programme and UNISIST, 1991. 94 p. PGI-91/WS/3.

In this short monograph Terry Cook adds sound practical advice to his evolving framework of appraisal theory<sup>1</sup> and fills a significant lacuna in the important RAMP study series.<sup>2</sup> We can be especially grateful that the problems of records containing personal information compels Cook to elaborate in new and important ways the philosophical grounding of archival appraisal.

For Cook, "appraisal is a work of careful analysis and of archival, diplomatic, and historical scholarship, not a mere procedure or process," so we mustn't expect easy answers. Instead we get guidance concerning where to look for answers and what criteria to take into account which welds the traditions of European and North American archival practice into a new paradigm.

While recognizing the politics of some governments, the demands of some legal systems, and the requirements for legitimation of a democratic society—which dictate that certain census and senior personnel records containing personal information must be kept—Cook offers that "the main working rule for archivists in appraising all [emphasis his] records is to destroy them. **The focus of the archivist should not be on explaining what is being destroyed, but rather on justifying what is being kept.**" And with this principle in mind, he offers a test grounded in the richest concept of evidential significance ever offered to North American archivists.

Records document transactions of the society. These transactions, which are sanctioned through law and policy and structured by procedure, reflect an "image" of the society and its workings. Cook suggests that the only compelling reason to retain files containing personal information is when they might, in the aggregate, provide evidence of the dissonance between the elsewhere documented image of the interaction between programme, agency, and citizen and the actual character of that interaction. Since the official "image" being contradicted is documented in published sources, policies and procedures, and subject files, we first appraise these and then bring to the voluminous case record containing personal information the question of whether it can provide

evidence to revise this image with one "built **inductively** from actual human experience through the institutions (and thus records) which its citizens create . . . ."

Here the theory "that the central dialectic of society is the tension between leading ideological currents and the mass phenomenon of people's collective lives" yields concrete guidelines because Cook establishes that the ability of these types of records to yield such evidence is correlated with the degrees of freedom they permitted their creators. And so he has us ask of the programme the degree to which it was participated in, the extent to which it evoked controversy, and if contemporaries recognized gaps between its targets and results because in these fault lines we can recognize the tensions. We ask of the agency whether it administered itself through "hard," fixed rules or flexible interpretations, if it was neutral with respect to its clients or treated them differently, and if it used information from other sources in reaching its determinations. And we ask of the citizens if they are consciously interacting with the agency for the purposes of the programme, if they are reporting first, second, or third hand personal information, and if they are accorded the freedom of their own terms or are narrowly confined by forms and categories established by others.

In such questions we discover the extent to which the record containing personal information could contribute to interpreting tensions between the image and the fact. At all times, and for Cook this is critical, "the records containing personal information resulting from the citizen-state interaction are important for documenting that interaction *per se*, and not for documenting the programme or the agency or the citizen separately."

Once we establish the evidential value of a small portion of these records, there will remain practical hurdles in implementing a preservation plan, such as determining if the records can be effectively sampled, protecting the confidentiality of individuals, and determining what is affordable, but to Cook these are not appraisal questions, but post-appraisal choices. He discusses them in a workmanlike fashion, pointing to other sources for more detailed guidance, but they are (refreshingly) not the focus of his attention. It is clear, even as he leaves us with a thirty-three point checklist summarizing his practical guidance and a select bibliography, that Cook's RAMP contribution is a steel-framed theoretical structure with copious and subtle footnotes and tight arguments intended to withstand the archival earthquake it should elicit. Its sleek lines are certainly more attractive than the slum of miscellaneous observations we have been offered for appraisal guidelines recently.<sup>3</sup>

As Cook continues to elaborate his views, I will enjoy entering into a debate with him over the rationale he suggests for distorting a representative view of citizen-state interactions in order to capture the "voice of marginalized groups," but for now I can only thank him humbly for having provided this rich diet of ideas in a menu of such solid guidance.

- 1 See especially Cook's "From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 28-49 and "Media Myopia," *Archivaria* 12 (Summer 1981), pp. 146-57.
- 2 For recent reviews of this entire series through 1990, see Richard Cox, "RAMP Studies and Related Unesco Publications: An International Source for Archival Administration," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990), pp. 488-95 and Michael Cook, "Unesco's RAMP Programme: A Pause to Reflect," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91), pp. 163-170.

3 Frank Boles, *Archival Appraisal* (New York, 1991).

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*Archives & Museum Informatics*

**Computer Systems Development: History, Organization and Implementation.** ANDREW FRIEDMAN with DOMINIC S. CORNFORD. Toronto: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1989. ISBN 0 471 92399 0.

In appraising and describing electronic records, archivists must be aware of the context of computer development systems in the agencies which created them. Such information provides the archivist with insights into the ways in which electronic records have changed as computer systems have evolved. Friedman and Cornford's book is important in understanding the implementation of computer systems because it demonstrates that many of the transformations in computerization that have occurred since the 1950s resulted from a continual process of technological change generated largely from within the computing installations in user organizations.

The orientation of *Computer Systems Development* is of special interest to archivists because it focusses on the sites where the electronic records are created and where most people are occupied with computer systems development, that is, the user organizations, rather than either computer hardware manufacturers or independent software houses and service bureaus. Similarly, the authors are mainly interested in those occupations concerned with computer systems development such as systems analysts and programmers (whom they often describe collectively as computer systems developers) rather than those that usually comprise the computer systems industry such as computer operators, data preparation, and control staff or sales staff.

Their historical analytical approach to computer systems development provides an important contribution to the archivist's understanding of the past, current, and future developments. By linking the organization of computer systems development to a range of social, economic and technical factors, the significant differences between different installations can be better understood. As Friedman and Cornford explain, the standard explanation for observed differences in computer installations was simply their age, based on the idea that all such organizations go through an invariant set of stages in their development. While they believe that this evolutionary approach may be of limited use, it must be supplemented with an analysis of the interaction between computer installations and their environments.

They suggest that the myriad ways in which the work of computer systems developers has changed since the 1950s can be understood in terms of a succession of phases, each of which is marked by a particular critical factor, a particular constraint on the further development and penetration of computer-based systems. Efforts to overcome this critical factor stimulate changes in management strategies towards computer systems developers, changes in the position of systems development activities within organizations and even variations in the orientation of technological changes. Why is it that different critical factors have been the focus of attention during the history of computing? This can be explained by a combination of forces, including technological changes in hardware and software, changes in the competition faced by suppliers of computer systems and continual shortages of skilled and experienced computer systems developers.