

Articles

Archives in a Wider World: The Culture and Politics of Archives^{*}

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RÉSUMÉ L'auteure propose ici une réflexion sur quelques questions que soulèvent la culture, la critique littéraire, l'histoire et le post-modernisme pour la gestion des documents, les archives et les archivistes, d'un point de vue britannique. Cet essai se fonde sur les changements observés, au cours des dix dernières années, dans la place des archives telle que perçue dans différents pays. L'auteure soutient que les archivistes ont le rôle majeur de résoudre les tensions sociales contemporaines concernant ce qu'il faut conserver et détruire et ce qu'il convient d'ouvrir ou de restreindre, que ce soit pour le présent ou, plus important encore, pour les générations futures. Les archivistes doivent expliquer de façon claire les fondements de leurs décisions et comprendre les biais inhérents qui les sous-tendent.

ABSTRACT This is a reflective essay on some of the cultural, literary criticism, historical, and postmodern implications for records management and archiving, archives, and archivists from a point of view situated in the United Kingdom. It is based on observing the changes, over the past ten years, in the position of archives in various countries' perceptions. The author maintains that archivists have the critical role of producing an archiving resolution of the tensions in society at any one time between what should be kept and destroyed, and what should be open and closed – both for the present and, more importantly, for future generations. Archivists need to make the manner of the archival resolution clear and understand the inherent biases in the processes necessary to achieve that resolution.

The subject of archives is, on the face of it, dry and dusty, but nevertheless fascinating for all sorts of reasons to many millions of people across the world. Moreover, in its formal, organizational, and utilitarian guise as “Arch-ives,” it is increasingly emerging from the “basement to the boardroom” in governments and organizations *and* becoming a cultural phenomenon at the same

^{*} This is a revised version of an unrefereed article for a Festschrift. I am indebted to discussions I have had with Michael Moss, Elizabeth Hallam-Smith, and Ian Willison. In particular, they have improved my own slender knowledge of the battleground between postmodernists (or at least some) and other historians (or at least some) and drawn my attention to the work of Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*, 2d ed. (London, 1997).

time.¹ Notably, it is permeating other consciousnesses, particularly that of literary criticism, while retaining its essential historical centrality as the source for academic, public, and popular history in its broadest definition. This is also occurring at the same time as debates continue over “what is history” from postmodernist and traditionalist perspectives. It is striking that the existence of archives is normally taken for granted in these debates. Although the “fetishism of the document” and other lively arguments about the content of archives and documents continue, the actual nature of archives and how we get them is not apparently of interest. This seems odd, as without them very little history, or documentary, or textual analysis can be written at all. It is these various manifestations of archives with which I am concerned in this essay.

So what are “archives” and their institutional form, “Archives” with a capital “A?” Perhaps we can explore this question by examining how “archives” and “Archives” manifest themselves to their creators and guardians, the professional practitioners like archivists, historians, and also to their publics. This manifestation has not been the same over time and will continue to evolve as archives do, and cannot be other than a direct reflection of their societies. For example, the “strong-box of empire,” the Public Record Office building itself, built by James Pennethorne for Sir Francis Palgrave in 1851–6 in Chancery Lane, has physically and symbolically moved to and taken on the landscaped openness of Kew Gardens.²

Archives and archives come in various guises from the professionals’ definition to the claimed archival status of Web sites on the Internet where the terms (and associated ones, documents, files, records, etc.) have been appropriated by information technology specialists and the creators of digital archives. You may find digital archives of poets as well as of football clubs on the Internet, and even, of course, some decidedly unsavoury digital archives. Perhaps because the images and information are not in book form, the term “archive” seems to have become far more common in “IT-speak” than the term “library” which remains more solidly positioned with books, specific place, and information.

At the same time, however, in the public’s mind the distinction between libraries and archives has become quite blurred, the two words commonly being

1 Terry Cook used this phrase “from the basement to the boardroom” in one of his presentations to English records managers and archivists at a conference of government records managers in Manchester, October 1996.

For the appearance of “archiving” as a general cultural phenomenon, note the London International Film Festival of Theatre (29 June–1 July 2001), where they performed “Dialogues on archiving” by having conversations staged between artists, philosophers, cultural historians, filmmakers, information technologists, and archivists. The subject was the culture of archiving and the archiving of culture. A similar project was staged in Hamburg in September 2000.

2 For a brief discussion of some of the physical and other changes to the Public Record Office as an institution, see Sarah Tyacke, “From the Strong-box of Empire to the Pavilions of the People: Archives Direct 2001,” in J.M. Barker, ed., *Proceedings of the International Conference, Old Institutions – New Images*, Freemantle, Western Australia, 29 July–1 August 1997 (Perth, 1997), pp. 111–117.

used interchangeably. One of the reasons for this must be that manuscripts and archives are often present in libraries together, and both are manuscript, which obscures their specific purposes. This has not been helped by the classification of library materials into book and non-book which again lays emphasis on the physical characteristic of the items rather than on the content: a case of the medium not the message. Martha Cooley, in her novel (1998) about archivist/librarian Matthias Lane at a prestigious American university, where the correspondence of T.S. Eliot to his friend Emily Hale is kept, refers to *librarians* as follows: “My mother was the censor and revealer of experience. She opened and shut its doors. Librarians, too, are gatekeepers – not of actual experience, of course, but of its written accounts. My job is to safeguard those accounts.” She then goes on to make Lane say: “As an *archivist* I have power over other people. I control access to materials they desire.”³ She evidently does not know there is a difference or does not think it important to distinguish.

There is clearly an emerging literary criticism interest now in the role of archiving and what it means beyond the preoccupations of archivists. Let us start, however, with a relatively safe point of departure, a professional definition: “Archives are the Documents accumulated by a natural process in the course of the conduct of Affairs of any kind, Public or Private, at any date; and preserved thereafter for reference, in their own Custody, by persons responsible for the affairs in question or their successors.” This classic definition coined by Sir Hilary Jenkinson in 1948 – although never in its “passive,” “impartial,” or “neutral” archiving formulation, wholly subscribed to – is recognized as an opening gambit for any debate on the nature of archives and Archives in the English-speaking world and more widely, and is confirmed by the critical importance accorded to the “provenance” and “authenticity” of records (or archives) by all archivists (and manuscript and other curators/librarians) across the world.⁴ Jenkinson believed very strongly that the archivist (and still more the historian) had no part to play in the appraisal of

3 See Martha Cooley, *The Archivist* (London, 1998), p. 246. T.S. Eliot’s letters to his friend Emily Hale are kept at Princeton University. A more recent manifestation of this merging of language is a note in the London newspaper Metro, “Tate launches a library for the arts.” This is quite clearly a research centre which includes material from such luminaries as Barbara Hepworth, Stanley Spencer, et. al. The library is then described as “the archive relating to the nation’s art since 1900, as well as the Tate’s own records.”

4 Roger Ellis and Peter Walne, eds., *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* (Gloucester, 1980), p. 237. Also, “the problems of nomenclature in archives,” p. 352. For the continuing debate on whether records and archives mean the same thing, see the general introduction in Judith Ellis, ed., *Keeping Archives* (Port Melbourne, 1993) and more recently the work of Frank Upward, “In Search of the Continuum: Ian Maclean’s ‘Australian Experience,’ Essays on Recordkeeping,” in Michael Piggott and Sue McKemmish, eds., *The Records Continuum. Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* (Sydney, 1994). The re-emergence of Jenkinson into this debate has been made by Sarah Flynn who points out that Jenkinson viewed the distinction between records in a current system and those in an Archive as an artificial one, a view that many of us share. See Sarah Flynn, “The Records Continuum Model in Context and Its Implications for Archival Practice,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 22, no. 1 (2001), pp. 88–89.

records, because they could not do it without importing their own personal judgement into the process. Thus, it was the creators alone, i.e., their appraisers or “weeders,” who did the job. Clearly this has not been entirely the case in practice, at least from the passing of the 1958 *Public Records Act*, when the Keeper was given the duty to “coordinate, supervise, and guide” in the matter of selection of public records in government departments.⁵ It may be that a convenient fiction developed that this was an impartial, neutral, and passive activity but this does not seem to me to be possible to sustain in reality. Perhaps Jenkinson was emphasizing the necessary fiduciary role of the archivist whose trustworthiness might be lessened in Jenkinson’s view, if the archivist entered into the selection process itself thereby “colluding” with the “weeders.”⁶

In the English (although *not* the American) tradition, “records,” or documents recording events (irrespective of their medium, e.g., from parchment to e-mail), from creation to archiving, are deemed to all be part of the same recording process and it is usual for the terms “record-keeping” and “archiving” to be used interchangeably throughout the record’s existence.⁷ Indeed the Public Record Office, which is the national archives, was so named and covers both the supervision of records management of current or semi-current records in departments and the archiving and access to a selection of those records once they are older or deemed to be historic records. The division between current records and historic records is one governed by administrative practice, a decision usually based on the lessening use of the record in everyday work. This process is not without inbuilt tensions, especially in the emerging compliant environment across the English-speaking world between

5 It is here that Jenkinson’s views and PRO practice were not the same. Nicholas Cox pointed this out to me (communication, 25 July 1996) and see Nicholas Cox, “National British Archives: Public Records,” in A. Seldon, ed., *Contemporary History: Practice and Method* (Oxford, 1988).

6 This point was made to me by Michael Moss, and certainly it would seem to be an element in Jenkinson’s thinking as well as for his desire to ensure the archive was selected by the creators and thus deliberately not selected under the influence of passing historical trends.

7 “Record” is the older established term from the medieval period onwards and meant a report or evidence. Classical Latin “recorder” to recall, remember, ponder over. “Archive” was the place where records were kept and in England dates from the mid-seventeenth century. Elizabeth Hallam-Smith tells me that the medieval Latin word “arca” (Medieval Latin word list) was a chest or trunk, as in “arks and hutches” of the Treasury of receipt in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Having said that, the term “record office” goes back to the early seventeenth century as well, and “rolls” and “records” were used to denote both current and historical records.

In the French tradition, the word “archives” means records from creation to archiving, as we in England use the words “record” or “archive” interchangeably to cover the continuum. The American tradition has divided the life of records into two broad stages: current records management, when the records are with the creators and used, or sometimes used, followed by the archiving of the historic record.

those involved in the current organizational activity and its record-keeping, and those records keepers or archivists seeking to provide for the future. For example, in the United States, all case papers after a trial have to be destroyed. Similarly in Australia, the compliance model is having an effect on archiving in that census documentation has been destroyed to comply with privacy legislation. The tendency in some countries seems to be for an information model which seeks to protect the privacy of the living at the expense of knowledge for future generations.⁸

In the American tradition, the two activities are much more distinct. The National Archives in the United States makes this distinction clear in its name – National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Where the records management (or archiving) of current records has become divorced from the “archiving” of historic records, the tendency has been, irrespective of terminology, for a division to develop. Surrey County Record Office is now the Surrey History Centre and deals with historic records. Indeed, there are two professional bodies in most English-speaking countries, one for records managers and one for archivists, although usually there are very close links: this does not mean that the record itself has changed its nature, merely that people’s sense of it alters as it grows older. It also means that the various practitioners who see themselves as doing different things from others in the same field prefer to band together in particular groups for their own professional purposes⁹ and can lose sight of the bigger picture, whether they are doing records management, selection, preservation, or doing interpretation and access for the public. Perhaps this is inevitable.

“Archives” with a capital “A” is a little easier to describe: it is used to mean the institutions or units within a country or organization which hold archives. The term “Archive” as institution does not denote something exactly comparable to Library and Museum as institutions, as the originating context or provenance of the Archive’s creation gives it its characteristics and purpose, whereas the collecting activity defines the library or museum, e.g., maritime museum.¹⁰ In this sense, archives are more akin to archaeological remains than they are to their obvious medium-kin, books and artefacts in libraries and

8 The effect of the data protection and freedom of information legislation in the English-speaking world has tended to require auditable record-keeping in some areas and the destruction of some records at due time, which is different from the previous administrative regimes where records about people, for example, were often open in people’s lifetimes. In some regimes this is still the case, so there is a no man’s land here in terms of what societies think is acceptable, e.g., census records being destroyed or being opened at seventy-five years or at 100 years.

9 See a provoking article on this by Anne Lockyer, “Should Archivists be Professionals?” in Margaret Proctor and C.P. Lewis, eds., *New Directions in Archival Research* (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 118–44.

10 My perception is that libraries and museums collect and Archives appraise and receive.

publications in the information and communication world.¹¹

If libraries have sought to find common terms to describe themselves and their contents independent of their own cultural genesis, this is not the case by and large in the archival world. On this point, it has been argued convincingly that it is not possible to compare Archives as institutions and the way archival systems are constructed in each country as if they were similar, culturally independent entities as museums and libraries are, because the terms used to describe them reflect national traditions and natural differences in language depending on the cultures concerned. As Eric Ketelaar points out,¹² because cultures are not congruent, a single archival terminology cannot express what it means for all countries. A seemingly simple word like “file” in the Russian language does not have the same meaning as the word “file” in English, because the systems in which they apply are different in purpose and significance. An approximation can be achieved which for, say, international cataloguing purposes is sufficient for finding items which relate to a particular search, but leaves the extraction of the “real” meaning(s) a subject apart. By way of further example, Ketelaar cites the view, sometimes offered, that in the German-speaking world, employees can be instructed and will do as they are told in respect of record-keeping, but that Americans need a technological solution because they do not believe employees will do the necessary record-keeping! There is also, as Michael Moss points out,¹³ a further cultural difference in that Americans, and to some extent the English, have reservations about for whom and for what purpose the record is being kept in the first place, hence their concerns over identity cards, CCTV or camera surveillance in public places, and other related records which might infringe their civil liberties.

This is not to say that describing and comparing the various archive systems by considering their characteristics in relation to their legal frameworks, histories, and cultures is not a desirable research activity, but it must be done with sufficient understanding of these wider aspects, rather than attempting to find or even suggest that one “best” model should fit all. This diversity may of course begin to change as computer-mediated communication (CMC) takes over and makes some of us more alike, at least superficially in the business and public administration fields, through the use of same hardware and software applications, similar administrative procedures, etc. But if the purpose in

11 See an earlier brief account of the differing structures of archival systems in England and elsewhere in Sarah Tyacke, “Continuous History or History by the Yard: Archives in the Year 2001,” *Archives XXIII* (April 1998), pp. 3–18.

12 See Eric Ketelaar, “The Difference Best Postponed? Cultures and Comparative Archival Science,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 142–48.

13 This comparison with the record-keeping tradition on the continent was raised by Michael Moss and seems to me to be valid across a number of archiving issues between the English-speaking world and continental Europe.

keeping records is dissimilar, or has a different emphasis from place to place, then the record-keeping practices will be different even if the words and applications *are* superficially similar.

What about the UK experience? Here the record-keeping or archiving systems are separate (as in Scotland) or devolved (as in Northern Ireland, and the potential is now there for Wales) and local, according to the private or public status of the originating bodies, i.e., the creators. This means that the relationship of archiving to the creators themselves is complex and, over time, legislation or rules of one sort or another have been developed to cover the inherent but critically important difficulties of what to keep, what to deposit or donate elsewhere, or else destroy; of what should be open and what should be closed and for how long. These norms change over time as well, depending on the views, at the national level, of parliaments or the law courts. Each organization and individual will have similar rules for archiving, some more arbitrary than others.

UK archiving or record-keeping at national and local levels derives from our political and juridical decisions over great periods of time (since 1066 or in some cases before) and thus from our consequent structures of public and private life. It is no accident now that matters of freedom of information and of data protection loom large in the archivist's world, as they have to deal with the implications for record-keeping, as do lawyers, legislators and administrators – and with just that “no man's land” between public and private life, between records of the dead and those of the living. A recent example of this is the privatization of railways and other nationalized industries, where the record remains public up to the date of privatization and then becomes the record of a private company and thus no longer a record for the public. This is regarded by some as quite unacceptable because the industries concerned are just as critical to the people as they were before privatization, and the record, they feel, should be kept as if it were a public record. This is perhaps much more problematic in the English-speaking world just because more activity is private – for example, we may have an established church but since the seventeenth century we were not required to belong to it (unlike Lutheran countries). Moreover, the amount of information the state could legitimately expect to hold about our activities was much more limited than in continental Europe.¹⁴

Archives are not just governmental or organizational in nature. They are all pervasive, as everyone either keeps records or is in one: you may be in a census and you will surely keep some form of written identification with you. Records (archives) can be prosaic, recording individual daily matters, or portentous, recording earth-shattering events. When they were created, and

14 Richard Brown, “Death of a Renaissance Record-Keeper: The Murder of Tomasso da Tortona in Ferrara, 1385,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 1–43.

indeed in some cases long after their creation (e.g., Domesday book), their purpose was temporal, to serve their creator, and it is only as a secondary purpose, although a very important one recognized by all societies, that they are valued as an authentic, historical record of the creators' lives and of the events they record. Sometimes, of course, governments, organizations, and people (including archivists) wilfully pervert the archival or evidential values of authenticity, provenance, and reliability, but in doing so they are yet confirming that these archival values exist and are important enough to pervert.

Although in one sense archiving is a continuing activity which does not change much, sometimes an alteration occurs in society which substantially affects archiving and access to records. Under the new UK *Freedom of Information Act* (2000),¹⁵ for example, the presumption is that information and records are available if requested by the public from the moment of creation, unless an exemption applies (clause 61[1]). Records thirty years old and older are defined as "historic records" and will, as now, be opened "wholesale" at that thirty-year point (if they haven't been before), when certain exemptions for current records cease to operate. Both current and historic records in government or in other public sector organizations (e.g., local government, the police authorities, hospitals, universities, schools, museums, libraries, publicly owned utilities) are covered by the Act when it comes into force in 2005. As now, the records may stay with the originating body if they are younger than historic records covered by the *Public Records Act 1958* or otherwise be either open or closed depending on exemptions to the relevant archive or record office.¹⁶

These border lands of time and access, between public and private, now and later or very much later, are under continual debate and argument as societies decide at legislative and lower levels where they want the balance to be between "openness" and secrecy. The tension remains palpable. In the UK, for example, the information commissioner will have a non-governmental and independent role in determining data protection and freedom of information where the public interest lies, as against official or private interest in cases of dispute. On the other hand, the cultural change necessary to encourage openness remains a challenge at government and public sector levels. Combining the role into one official position seeks to minimize the inherent potential for conflict between the two regimes of personal privacy and freedom of information. Inevitably, however, some disputes are bound to have to be settled by the courts.

Thus, the determination of whether to preserve/destroy, open/close is an

15 See Susan Healy, "Freedom of Information: An Introduction," *Metropolitan Lines* 53 <<http://www.hmc.gov.uk/glan/met-54.htm>>.

16 This thirty-year time span relates to the length of career of civil and other public servants. There is no reason why it should not alter, and indeed some exemptions under FOI will continue for longer as they do at present (2001).

essential part of archiving or recording and is one of the distinctions between records/archives and other texts which have been created, as their primary purpose is already settled (e.g., a manuscript for a book to be published or to be made public in another way). The record or archive is evidence itself which has been recorded somehow and is not medium dependent.

This is not to say that archives are not sometimes deliberately created on occasion or that archives are anything more than a selection or construct from the total available – a selection which someone or a group has had to make. But a collection is collected from an existing, normally publicly available, group of artefacts, in the case of published works, evidently produced by the manufacturers for immediate public consumption; the collectors may even seek to claim to be comprehensive (i.e., to have collected or to seek to collect the totality). The archive or record (whether current or historic) is selected, i.e., it is deliberately less than the totality, depending on the significance given by the selectors and/or the creators to the thought or activity of the creators; parts of the total record, before any process of archiving has taken place, may, of course, inadvertently be left to survive until their value is recognized by succeeding generations and the records are deemed important enough to join the archive! Even here the chances are that someone thought the documents were worth *not* throwing away. So archives tend to be a mixture of deliberate selection and survival for whatever reason.

Whether the record itself is also created by an author to be preserved and then communicated to the public many years later remains a difficult point; how far does the creator's knowledge of the possibility of public communication affect the creation, even though many records will never be kept and thus never disclosed?¹⁷ We may consider here the Swedish tradition where, since 1766 under the *Freedom of the Press Act* (chapter 2, art. 1), the records of public administrations can be made public almost immediately. On the face of it, this seems an obvious "good," but what then does the record not *re-cord*?¹⁸ Elsewhere, when the government record is publicly disclosed this will probably be towards the end of the career of the public servant, and for members of the public, authors, and others, when they are dead unless they allow privileged access whilst alive. Here again we may refer to Martha Cooley's novel

17 The Diaries of Wedgewood-Benn spring to mind here, where the clear intention was to publish them and to archive them and other papers specifically for the public. The archive is to be deposited in tape form and paper form with the British Library.

18 There is also a 1980 *Swedish Secrecy Act* which lists some exceptions to this freedom of information regime, but all the documents which are not open to public inspection are specified in this special act. See Ministry of Justice, *Public Access to Information and Secrecy with Swedish Authorities* (Sweden, 1981). I am indebted to Susan Healy for this reference. The nature of the challenge is well summed up in a recent article by Heather MacNeil, "Providing Grounds for Trust: Developing Conceptual Requirements for the Long-Term Preservation of Authentic Electronic Records," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000), pp. 52–78.

where the archivist takes it upon himself to secretly destroy the letters of T.S. Eliot to Emily Hale: “An archivist serves the reader’s desire. Yet what of the writer’s – is it of no consequence?” (p. 322). While there is indeed a balance to be struck and the tension is always there, it is the creator and the receiver of the correspondence who, at the time of the possibility of deposit in the Archive, should together make that decision; sometimes they do not agree and either the records are destroyed or kept and deposited, but it is not the archivist (having been entrusted with the record) who should take it upon herself to make the decision to destroy, as that would be arbitrary and would definitely abrogate her fiduciary responsibility. At the very least, the issue should be decided upon by a set procedure under an authority set up publicly to do so. In the UK public sector, the Lord Chancellor’s Advisory Council, chaired by the senior civil law judge, the Master of the Rolls, advises the minister on difficult cases of opening and closing records. With private papers this is not the case, as archivists may find themselves having to achieve the right balance of openness and closure in line with the creator’s/depositor’s wishes and their institution’s (in the case of public ones) responsibility to make the archives public.

II

Having dealt with the relevant principles of archiving for my present purpose, I now want to look at Archives as institutions, like museums and libraries with which they have very close affinities. But their purpose is very particular. They may have similar collections and give information to the public as libraries and librarians do, but they also keep the official record which they hold in trust for the present and the future.

An Archive or archives and records are not medium-dependent; the medium may be film, sound, or whatever, although until the late twentieth century the Archive tended to be comprised of paper or parchment documents; it depends for its definition upon the body that created it, not the medium. A book can be part of an archive and an archive part of a manuscript collection in a library, museum, or wherever, as long as it is an identifiable assembly of documents (objects) of whatever sort which derive from a body and which have not been rearranged. If this sounds too much like a Russian doll approach to archives (archives within other archives, and so on within an Archive, Library, or other organization’s collections), it is because that is how records tend to be selected and accumulated. By preserving knowledge of this process, the historical context of the individual items is not lost and thus their contextual sense in the widest interpretation is preserved in their own time for those who come after.

Similarly, digital records (i.e., those which are created digitally) are and will be archived and held by an Archive. These records, sometimes called “born digital,” are the original, authentic, and reliable records, rather than the

paper or other medium printouts from the digital original (although at present we have to rely on the paper outputs, as our ability to archive the digital is still not quite there); these e-archives are and will be the authentic Archives of e-records. There are, however, major problems about representational forms in this medium because the reader will rarely see the record as it was viewed by the creator, and thus new ways of describing what, for example, “authenticity” or “custody” means in this digital context are needed at legal (and other defining) levels. This is perhaps the greatest challenge for archiving itself if it is to continue without great loss in the coming decades.¹⁹

But Archives, like libraries, may also hold those records, which have been preserved digitally, on microfilm, as well as in their original medium, to improve the preservation of the originals and to provide digital access. At present, there is confusion about the use of digitization to make surrogates as a conservation and access medium and “born digital.” These digital surrogates are not “the record” anymore than they are “the book” but they may be the “best” approximation or surrogate that can be provided in terms of resources available to preserve the originals and to provide worldwide access to the digitized originals. Here we may cite the effort of the Library of Congress’s American Memory, which includes over seven million digital items and, in the UK, the Public Record Office’s effort to bring the 1901 census (over thirty million entries) digitally to publics across the world. In the case of these originals which have been digitized, the preferred solution, if it can be afforded, is to keep both the artefact for its “record-ness” or “book-ness” *and its authenticity given the instability of the digital forms at present* using the digitized version for access and to protect the original from constant use. The balance will always need to be struck between the value placed upon the artefact and the text or information contained within it. In some cases, the document or record becomes an icon in its own right, separate from the information it contains, and thus has an inherent value like a museum object. Here we may cite the Domesday Book, first a symbol of oppression and then a defender of property and other rights, or even more so, the Magna Carta. In more recent years, the personal records of soldiers who died in the First World War and which were then almost destroyed in the Second World War by German bombing, now known as the “burnt documents,” are an emotionally charged extensive archive group and have become iconic, representing, perhaps in their own semi-destruction, the waste of those years.

Archives frequently stay where they were created, rather than moving to “historic Archives” or Museums or Libraries. The oldest surviving Archives in

19 Heather MacNeil, “Providing Grounds for Trust: Developing Conceptual Requirements for the Long-Term Preservation of Authentic Electronic Records,” *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000) pp. 52–78, which is an account of the work of the International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES) project set up in 1999.

Europe²⁰ are those where the royal administrations decided to concentrate their archives in one centralized repository. The Archivo de Simancas in Spain, created by Charles V in 1542, is the earliest. In England, James I appointed Levinus Monk and Thomas Wilson “keepers and registrars of Papers and Records” in 1610, and in the same year the Vatican Archives were recreated in their modern form.

“Archive” as institution implies that others may search in it over long periods of time, but “archives” (i.e., within Archives or remaining with the creators) can and do stay closed for very long periods without losing their archival nature. This means, amongst other things, that archives and Archives are more than cultural institutions which the public visit to do research or to see exhibitions. The tension between Archives as cultural, historic institutions as against their role as records selectors and preservers continues to exist. There is, I would also argue, a significant issue of public perception here – for example, in Canada, the emphasis on total archives, and in the United States, the availability of extensive private funding for manuscript collections, has led the public to view archives as documentation centres where “everything” should be acquired and retained. This school of thought unfortunately does not acknowledge or understand legislated mandates or methodological tools such as appraisal criteria. In England, we have, for example, “archives” like the Land Registry as fiduciary guardians of the record so people can be sure that they own their property, and we have archives as guardians of cultural heritage, tradition, and so on. They are clearly not the same.²¹

An interesting aspect of this is that museums and libraries do not have an originating verb to describe their activity. Archives and archives are archived, records and record offices record or keep the record. But museums are “collections of material” for research and public exposition, and they have their own archives or records as creators. They collect. The British Library, for example, developed as one part or collection within the British Museum. The archives of the British Museum remain the collective memory of that institution. Libraries, too, “collect” books and other published works for the public, however produced; they have archival collections of books, and archives in their manuscript collections. Unlike archives, they do not “museum” or “library” artefacts or books. They “collect” them. The nouns “museum” and “library” are collective nouns for collections or holdings of museum artefacts and of library artefacts and the services that they provide. This very activity of col-

20 See Michel Duchein, “The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe,” *American Archivist* 55 (1992), pp. 14–25.

21 This point has been raised more clearly by Michael Moss. Many North Americans would argue that there is also a tension between historians and archivists, especially regarding pragmatism and professionalism – and especially as the two disciplines diverge. For example, historians frequently adopt a “we-know-best” attitude regarding acquisition and appraisal, and there is still a lingering tendency to regard archivists as the handmaidens of history.

lecting, of course, produces archives, correspondence with donors, purchase invoices, catalogues, and so on, the very stuff of much literary research.

We have just described, as defined by professionals, what archives and Archives are (at least in the English-speaking world) yet they have not normally emerged into discussions about cultural matters nor been featured in literature or in films until very recently. A UK government example of this recent cultural emergence is the establishment in 2000 of the Museums, Archives and Library Council, named RESOURCE by the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). This Council seeks to raise the cross-sectoral agenda of the three domains so that they can have greater influence in wider cultural life and also combine in appropriate areas, such as training or standards for the care of collections, in a more coherent way than in the past. For archives, there is the novelty of being included with the other much larger domains, in terms of numbers of institutions and users involved (though not in amounts of material), and the hope that this new-found visibility will lead to reforms and developments for the archival community as a whole, especially at the regional and local level. This is all the more important as Archives' existence as an entity in their own right is still little appreciated, not least because archive professionals are by nature pragmatic and others, such as historians, take their existence for granted, except when the archives are at risk of destruction.²² Archivists look for utilitarian and increasingly managerial purposes for record-keeping and archiving; for example, they propound the use of good records management and of preserving e-records in government, which means that files can be found and the administrator's time is not wasted, or the use of archives as evidence which may or may not prove a proposition or case in the courts or explain an event in the past. They are concerned with the practice of archiving and rarely consider the theoretical implications of what they do, especially in England. This utilitarian "rights and evidence" version of archiving appears not to have much to do with the "archives as treasures" characterized by such holdings as the Domesday Book and Shakespeare's will from 1616, nor even with historical scholarship. But the continuum is there and comes into its own when the present needs an explanation of the past or the present generation desires to leave a record for the future.

This is most wonderfully expressed by the novelist Jose Saramago in *All the Names* (1999).²³ The novel is about a national Central Registry of Births, Marriages, and Deaths which is contrasted with the outside world of "real" life. The current registry holds the record of a young woman; this leads one of the

22 See, for example, an account in the *Sunday Times* (25 March 2001) where a French historian, Alexandre Gady, is reported as secretly photographing decaying archives in the Hotel de Soubise building of the French National Archives to bring to the public's attention the critical state of the archives.

23 Jose Saramago, *All the Names* (London, 2000), p. 5 and pp. 181–82.

clerks (the hero, or is it the Registry/Archive itself?) to an exploration of her life. Apart from the descriptions of the registry of the living and the archive of the dead and of the relationship between people's lives/deaths and their records, the problems of housing all the records, and countless other bits of archival minutiae are dissected:

We all know that, however long old people may last, their hour will always come. Not a day passes without the clerks having to take down files from the shelves of the living in order to carry them to the shelves at the rear, not a day passes without them having to push towards the end of the shelves those that remain. The papers pertaining to those no longer alive are to be found in a more or less organised state in the rear of the building, the back wall from time to time has to be demolished and rebuilt some yards further as a consequence of the unstoppable rise in number of the deceased.

Eventually the Registrar issues an order that:

the dead will remain in the same place they were that they occupied in the archive while alive, secondly file by file, document by document, from the most recent to the most ancient we will move towards the reintegration of the past dead into the archive which will then become everyone's present. I know that the second part of the operation will take several decades to carry out, that we will no longer be alive, nor probably will the subsequent generation when the papers of the last dead person, torn, worm-eaten, darkened by the dust of ages, return to the world from which, by one last, unnecessary act of violence, they were removed. Just as definitive death is the ultimate fruit of the will to forget, so the will to remember will perpetuate our lives. This is not for the benefit of the dead but for the living. I have only been talking about life here.

In the story the archives play a central role and the clerk is the hero/resurrector of a record of a life for one person, who is alive then dies; the Registrar then determines to do this for everyone. The archives are in themselves also a vast text collected, edited, and ordered by the clerks according to strict rules and meant, at least by the Registrar, to be read eventually. The resonance, with the taking and keeping of the National Census, which in England is kept confidential for 100 years and is then "released" or published, is obvious.

The utilitarian purpose of knowing who is alive and who is dead in any state, by record-keeping in the registry, is then to be used for the cultural purpose of keeping the nation's memory for the living, thus combining the two integral purposes of record-keeping or archiving quite naturally. This is what archivists do or should, in my view, be doing. With their disciplines in records management, selection, disposal and destruction or preservation, conservation, and cataloguing, methods of regulating and providing access and of interpreting the records in their contexts both at the document specific level and in wider historical contexts, they can make a difference to both the utilitar-

ian purposes of record-keeping and to the historical or cultural purpose which goes beyond good records management (or process) and beyond cataloguing and access. These disciplines allow, for example, historians to have some assurance that what they discover or construct about the past has some basis in evidence (or the record) which has been selected, preserved, catalogued, and interpreted for them according to professional archival standards and thus gives them some insight into the past, which is beyond fiction or self-referential textual interpretation.

Where has this relatively new literary interest and recognition of the role of archives and archivists come from? Where will it lead? It has already led to an upsurge of interest in people's own history, which, enabled by the Internet, has become a phenomenon in its own right. At least one million people an hour tried to access the 1901 census Web site on 2 January 2002 and the level continued to grow. This means that not just genealogists, but people who want to know about their family's past, and who would not describe themselves as family historians, can find things out in a few minutes. Unfortunately, they all tried at once and the site is now being revamped to control the traffic. The overwhelming response seems to me to point to a convergence of all sorts of historical and personal information, perhaps with locational ones (maps, etc.), which will be one of the great participative activities across Western countries. It also inevitably raises the profile of Archives and archiving. Archives were and are the preserve of the administrator and archivist and then of the historian and the public, after all. As in other documentary-based disciplines, for example, the history of cartography, which is my own specialization,²⁴ the interest seems to derive at least in part from the influence of the French philosophers, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Derrida's view of archives has been mostly ignored in professional archival literature. In 1999, however, Brien Brothman in "Declining Derrida"²⁵ explained for the benefit of archivists some of the concepts the philosopher has had about archives. More recently, Terry Cook has looked explicitly at the implications of what Derrida has said, as part of a review of what postmodernism can mean for what professional archives call "archival science."²⁶ For my purpose here, the salient point is

24 See J.B. Harley, "Deconstructing the Map," *Cartographica* 26 (Summer 1989), pp. 1–20. The influence of Roland Barthes's *Elements of Semiology* (1968) in particular is evident in the conception of the History of Cartography project as envisaged by J.B. Harley and David Woodward in 1982. In this field the author has written a number of books, catalogues, and articles about maps and charts and has therefore had to deal first hand with the context and meaning of these particular artefacts or texts and their wider interpretation and significance beyond the linear history of the mathematical and cartographical development of conventional maps and charts. See for example S. Tyacke, ed., *English Map-Making 1500–1650* (1983) or "Describing Maps," in Peter Davison, ed., *The Book Encompassed. Studies in Twentieth-Century Bibliography* (London, 1992), pp. 130–41.

25 Brien Brothman, "Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction," *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), pp. 64–88.

that it is a philosopher who has written about his concept of archives and described it as an activity to do with remembering and forgetting, and has extracted (as Terry Cook puts it) “new formulations for old concepts.”

Derrida’s *Archive Fever* of 1995–96²⁷ considers the role and meaning of archiving and archives, in which he includes all texts, writing and forms of duplication, printing, e-mail, and so on in human history. By using the Freud archive as his example, he illustrates to his satisfaction, amongst other things, that writing is archiving and vice versa. He coins the word “archivology” – “a word which does not exist but which could designate a general and interdisciplinary science of the archive.” We archival professionals call it archival science, although whether his idea of it and ours would coincide remains to be seen. The “fever” he speaks about is human-kind’s desire to archive or to have memory which, as archivists know at a more prosaic level, is inseparable from the capacity to “forget” either wilfully or naturally over time, or if suffering from disease; in archival terms he sees this “forgetting” translated into the activities of deliberately destroying or keeping records and archives secret from others or even losing them in the course of time. The prime current example of remembering or archive “fever” is the pursuit of genealogy or family history, which sometimes borders on ancestor worship: a not unknown characteristic of the older manifestation in the work for landed families of the College of Heralds. For archivists and historians, the provenance of this work by Derrida is revealing in that it was first given in 1994 as a lecture to an international colloquium in London entitled “Memory and the Question of Archives” under the auspices of the Société Internationale d’Histoire de la Psychiatrie et de la Psychanalyse of the Freud Museum and of the Courtauld Institute of Art. As far as I know, no archivists took part.

This association of the genesis of memory, writing, and archiving is not new, although the conclusions have not been exactly the same. The historian Michael Clanchy,²⁸ for example, in his chapter “Trusting Writing” in *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066–1307*, points out that “documents did not immediately inspire trust and that it was some time before memory as spoken was supplanted by memory as written.” Indeed in some areas it never has, e.g., personal reminiscing. At the same time, as the administration grew

26 Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 1 (2001), pp. 3–27. Here he summarizes much of what he and others have said since 1996 and suggests links between postmodernism and archival science especially in respect of provenance in appraisal, made on the basis of what is the role and significance of the body in society whose records you might select, and virtual distributed archives, already embraced in some English-speaking countries.

27 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Eric Prenowitz, trans. (Chicago, 1998).

28 M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record, England 1066–1307* 2d ed. (Oxford, 1993), p. 231.

in Norman England and later, methods of authenticating and inventorying the written records had to be found and the idea of official custody of the records had to be developed.²⁹ Archiving and writing as well as memory are very close in function and have other similar characteristics, e.g., being selective, which seems to have captured Derrida's imagination in *Archive Fever*.

Of equal importance in discussing archives are Derrida's and others' views normally described as postmodernist: that, as we apprehend the world and the past through signs, language, and texts of one sort or another, it follows that everything we think we know is textual; and that, in the act of reading and understanding, we place our own meaning into the texts; and that, thus, the author's meaning or intention is just one meaning among many and those other readings may in principle be as equally valid as the author's or anyone else's. Richard Evans in *In Defence of History* (1997) takes issue with this philosophical view of knowledge when applied by historians and others to such an extent that the events which the record records are themselves denied. This he calls hyper-relativism.³⁰

Whether you subscribe to this postmodernist view or versions of it, or consider that particular texts, in this case records and archives, have particular and distinguishing values which people recognize ("record-ness"), as I argue below, the central issue for recording or archiving remains what should be kept and what should be destroyed, unless we just leave it to chance, which as noted above is rarely really the case. This is the moment when the creators – and nowadays the archivists as well – determine what the record shall be. Together they decide, at a particular point, what will be kept and what will be destroyed for the present and the future and, furthermore, whether and when the selected records will be open to be read. This elevates archiving to a role well above merely keeping the historic or cultural archives as received and making them available; it presupposes a gatekeeper role at the very least and some role in the manufacture of present history for the future. After all, in the UK the passing of the thirty-year "opening" legislation in 1967 meant that immediately the "making of History" of the first thirty years of the twentieth century could begin in earnest, which hitherto had been difficult if not impossible with a fifty-year rule! Not only did the reduction derive from political will and legislative opportunity, but it also signified perhaps a general change in the society of the late sixties, normally characterized as permissive.

29 For examples of this see Adam Fox, "Remembering the Past in Early Modern England: Oral and Written Tradition," *TRHS IX* (1999), pp. 233–56 and Andy Wood in the same volume, "Custom and the Social Organisation of Writing in Early Modern England," pp. 257–69.

30 For the implications of this for history see Richard Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 95, and for an account of the implications of this theory on bibliography and texts see D.F. McKenzie, "Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts," *The Panizzi Lectures 1985* (British Library, 1986) in particular the chapter on non-book texts, pp. 23–43.

Such musings do not normally sit easily with the preoccupations of the archivist, who for practical purposes accepts the archive as a given, a natural residue of the past, albeit selected, and with it the values of authenticity, provenance, and reliability, and whose professional literature is about matters to do with such archival principle and practice, focussing on the record and on its immediate context and part in the record-ing process. While this wider cultural and philosophical view of archives may not be to everyone's taste (and indeed, they may feel, it is contrary to their archival and historical principles) and the practical use for the administrator or the archivist unclear, at least the proposition that archives and archiving are part of a continuing dialogue between the past and the present for the future seems as good a view of it, as the more utilitarian records management aspects with which we are so familiar. Unless perversity overwhelms, it seems relatively obvious.

At this level we can perhaps see what Derrida is getting at and, even perhaps, recognize what we have been doing for years – but as something he has elevated beyond our immediate practical concerns. This, however, is not to suggest that there are no historical facts or events of which the record is evidence, in the same way that maps and photographs are evidence of the world, but that how we select records to preserve for present and future historians has and will change over time as has the interpretation by historians of those selected records.

While this philosophical concern with archives is in itself interesting, what does it imply for archives, Archives, and archivists? At the very least it seems to imply that records and archives are not just the auxiliary reference assistance to the current administrator (which they are and should be, of course) but also a necessary part of the business, whatever it is, or that they are critical to the historian's job (which of course they are, whether they are interested in state, organizational, group, or individual histories as evidenced by oral, audiovisual, digital, or written records), but that there is now an evident philosophical and cultural move to reposition them explicitly and publicly as active contributors to the societal process of remembering and forgetting.³¹ Again, this is perhaps mirrored in the legislation for data protection and freedom of information in Western countries which cannot take effect without methodical record-keeping. Even more so this is the case in countries where the archivist may be the trustworthy agent to provide evidence to stop the theft of assets

31 This is also evident from the recent series of Sawyer seminars on archives, documentation, and the institutions of social memory, held September 2000–April 2001 at the Advanced Study Center, The International Institute, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, United States. The seminar discussed such themes as “National archives and the artifice of memory,” “Archives: intermediaries in the production of knowledge,” “Archival appraisal: creating the past” (appraisal as a determining process for historical consciousness; appraisal as a determinant of social memory), and “Archival politics in dissolving states: the post soviet region” and so on. Apart from the historian Patrick Wright there were no English presenters, as far as I can tell.

and to provide guarantees as to title for property, etc., or, in the case of the reunification of Germany, the operator of the release of the secret police records for society.

It is perhaps easier to see the interaction of society, politics, and the role of Archives at work in newer countries than England, where the role identified for the Archives has been made more explicit than here at various stages in that country's history. If we look specifically at Canada, the history of the National Archives as written by Danielle Lacasse and Antonio Lechasseur³² reveals that the National Archives was quite clearly designed to help build a national identity. The Archive was, from its inception in 1872, a National Archive distributed across the provinces built up from hand-copied records and later surrogate form from microfilm from France and England, and acquired from various other deposits of records of *and about* Canada.

The National Archives decided to collect archives about Canadian life (not merely those of government) and to promote Canadian identity and nationalism through the dissemination of a common history. It was not until the 1966 Public Records Order, which set up the government records programme (i.e., a records management programme for government departments), that the authority of the Archives was confirmed in this area. The National Archives of Canada thus began as the history or memory of the nation.

In 1986 the National Archives of Canada then moved on to a programme of "democratization" to make the collections and the archivists (as the then National Archivist Jean-Pierre Wallot proclaimed) "serve people of every origin and from all walks of life, with a variety of needs." For example, he said, "we help genealogists, journalists, government workers, jurists and visitors engaged in such varied activities as producing films, etc...." The mission of the Archives, through its government records management service, has again expanded, continuing the historical/cultural service to the public, but also addressing the present preoccupations of all Canadians to find out about their rights, whether they be First Nations with land claims or individuals who have court cases requiring archival evidence held in the Archives. This may be characterized as a re-emphasis of "evidential" or fiduciary archives, i.e., archives which provide legal evidence to give citizens assurance or evidence of their rights.

The same history is played out in New Zealand, and, with the change of name from the Scottish Record Office to the National Archives of Scotland, the same process continues within the United Kingdom, as the state itself alters and the roles within the state follow suit. Nearly every country in the world now has a national library and a national archives as expressions of how they see their identities.

32 Danielle Lacasse and Antonio Lechasseur, *The National Archives of Canada, 1872-1997* (Ottawa, 1997). See also the article by Bruce Montgomery elsewhere in this issue of *Archivaria*.

As for the democratization of Archives this seems to be a result of post-1945 better health, longer lives, and more leisure for the retired, at least in the English-speaking world; and also of a far greater visibility of history in general and archives in particular through the media such as the television channel the History Channel, and the programmes of Simon Schama, David Starkey, Niall Ferguson, and others in using archives to explain and debate the past from their different historical perspectives.

Where, however, the consensus on what the state and society should be doing does not exist, or, worse, where the very existence of the state becomes an issue, either internally or from external forces, then the archives and the Archives become a battleground. This may literally be a question not merely of saving the records/artefacts from physical destruction or theft, but also questioning how the archive was constructed in the first place and its mode of communication to the public (if it has one); it may be accused of perhaps perverting, or colluding in that perversion, what others regard as the “true” history to the country’s inhabitants and the world, or perhaps of keeping the record entirely from them. The records of Communist governments or of right-wing dictatorships are extreme cases of this. In these examples, state archives in particular reflect the histories of those governments and countries and give evidence of how power has been used, sometimes by the absence of records owing to deliberate destruction in sensitive areas or the almost obsessive total recording of activities in others. The Nazi regime and the former Soviet Union were examples of a monolithic state record.³³

Even in less extreme circumstances there are occasions when the national archives finds itself locked in disputes about record ownership, selection, and opening. For example, in 1974 an agreement was reached between Richard Nixon, who resigned the presidency of the United States after the Watergate affair, and the government which allowed Nixon to share custody with the government, giving him the right to erase certain tape recordings after five years and for the rest to be destroyed after ten years or at his death, whichever came first. In retaliation for this agreement, the Congress passed the *Presidential Recordings and Materials Preservation Act* in 1974 to regain control of the recordings and to avoid such privileged agreements in the future. Nixon filed suit in the U.S. District Court in Washington, claiming, among other things, that all previous presidents had treated presidential papers as private property. In 1977, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld congressional legislation ordering that all the documents of the Nixon administration, including some

33 The accumulation of records often duplicated across the regions and states is a feature of the record-keeping of the former USSR. It seems to be the result of fear by the bureaucrats themselves that if all the files were not kept then they would be held to account by their superiors. A “just in case” mentality was institutionalized in the bureaucracy which also kept the records under close control and normally secret for the state’s own use, not the public’s.

four thousand hours of tape recordings, be taken out of his hands and placed in the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). The Archives was to make “public those materials which have general historic significance.” The tapes duly arrived and the work of the archivists began to identify, sort, and select those for public release according to review criteria; this continued throughout the 1980s with continuing legal disputes which eventually drew them into the courtroom battles as classification regulations changed. Reviewing and re-reviewing went on and on and had still not been fully resolved at the time of writing.³⁴

Likewise, Verne Harris, now of the South African History Archive, has written about some of the process whereby South Africa is emerging as a democracy from the apartheid government. From his own experience, he comments, “a state archivist gets to know things”; and of the apartheid regime and its archives, “in the crudest sense this was a struggle of remembering against forgetting ... against systematic forgetting sustained by apartheid ideology.”³⁵ The archivist cannot plead ignorance. He has to decide what to do as an archivist with a professional commitment to fiduciary responsibility or trust. This perhaps should give him an acute awareness of the necessary critical “cross-questioning” of the evidence or the record, which he has before him, about its authenticity and context. He writes,

Let me illustrate these various points with the example of a researcher consulting a correspondence file originating from a government office:

- There are the voices of the documents’ authors, formal and informal. Who are they? What functional-structural context animates and shapes them? What are their purposes, explicit and implicit? What are they hiding? What do they fail to see?
- There are the voices (usually silent) of the bureaucrats who used and managed the file. Did they place all relevant documentation on the file? It could be that related documents were placed on other files. It could be that material was never filed officially, but rather kept informally by officials and subsequently disposed of. Documents, even whole files, may have been destroyed to protect the interests of individuals or the office. So the researcher might be, and in most cases will be, looking at a partial, deliberately constructed representation of process. And the representation, as Foucault has demonstrated in various contexts, will bear indelibly the markings of the bureaucratic systems which spawned it.
- There are the voices of archivists. Why did they choose to preserve the file? What related records did they choose not to preserve? What policies, strategies, and methodologies informed the decision? How have they arranged and described the file? What descriptive connections to other records have they provided? How are they making the

34 See Seymour M. Hersh, “Nixon’s Last Cover-Up: The Tapes He Wants the Archives to Suppress,” *The New Yorker* (14 December 1992).

35 Verne Harris, “Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 132–41.

file available? And in all of this, what narratives, what sectors of the state, what societal processes, what categories of record, what user groups are the archivists privileging?³⁶

This interrogation of the archive or file is about context and motivation, about being critical of the source and of its context, a hardly novel nor indeed unusual archival procedure for historians but recast for renewed emphasis on the intimacy of records, their creators, and their milieu.

If the record, its definition, its selection, and its interpretation has become less certain than in the past, whether by virtue of postmodernist influence, or by virtue of the instability of digital records, or by the different expectations of different users, for example, ethnic groups, it does not mean that archivists should abrogate responsibility for selecting what we regard as the authentic and reliable record of the past. We have not imagined the records we select; they were a function of the creators' thought or activity when first created. We are dealing not with theories of knowledge, but with the record of the past, selected or constructed though it may be, and at this level we have the disciplines to be able to say that one record is authentic or not, that it relates to an event or fact in the past. We need to acknowledge our own influence and should thus state clearly why we have selected what we have or have not selected, if that is ours to determine, and in what way the records are deemed to be authentic and have a reliable context or provenance. We also need to say what we have done as the fiduciary agents, i.e., the record-keepers or archivists to ensure the records are kept untampered once they pass into our custody. This is especially difficult in respect of digital records as we do not know what these values of record-ness will mean exactly, nor quite how to archive them. As an example of this overt method in action for selection, we might, and indeed do, wish to archive the personal records of soldiers of both World Wars, because people tell us they are important to them, but should we archive the records of those military personnel between the wars because the present generation would like us to do so? If we have to choose for reasons of cost whether to hold some records and not others, as we do every day, what are the criteria for choice?³⁷ Once chosen, we should attempt to describe or catalogue the archives as accurately as we can, given the evidence, much as conservators will record what they have done to

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 135–36.

³⁷ See <www.pro.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/acquisition/intro.htm> where there is an example of an acquisition policy which notes that such a policy needs to take account the opinions of the present users, academics, families and local historians, etc. It states that "Any selection decision is an assessment made at one point in time about what is important about the past." In taking those decisions today, it seems appropriate to draw on a value system which is relevant to contemporary preoccupations, rather than those of the 1950s, i.e., when the *Public Record Act* was passed. Particular operation selection policies have been expanded, covering, e.g., industrial policy (pp. 1974–83), the use and conservation of the countryside for recreational purposes (pp. 1974–83), as well as acquisition policies for departments in the traditional man-

restore a painting. We the archivists should continue to take issue with those who subvert or argue against the evidence of the record or its “record-ness” of authenticity and provenance or make up stories, which have no basis in the record, if by reason of empirical investigation we find what they say to be an assertion having no archival basis. A recent case is the popular Hollywood film of the capture of the Enigma machine – which fails to reveal the record that this was a British exploit – because it was not thought important to the drama of the fictional plot.³⁸

More serious archival or record controversy surrounds politically right-wing assertions that the Nazi extermination camps did not exist.³⁹ Actual tampering with the record also occurs and it is well known that the Canadian Department of National Defence altered records relating to Canada’s peace-keeping activities in Somalia (1995) before releasing them to a journalist, and then ordered the destruction of the original versions.⁴⁰ Under the UK *Freedom of Information Act* (2000) this will be a criminal offence as it now is in Canada for any record destroyed that is subject to an access to information request.

In circumstances less clearly defined than those above, archivists and historians, like lawyers, have to deal with what is probable and what is reasonable in light of the evidence or record, or in its absence, rather than with certainties. In the case of the Public Record Office, the connection with the similar juridical processes of collecting evidence or records and then arguing the case from them, and then judging where the balance of probability from the record or evidence lies, is perhaps more obvious than elsewhere as the office’s origins were legal and juridical. The first keepers of the rolls or records of Chancery were themselves equity judges and presumably knew where all the evidence was in any given case.⁴¹ More recently, the present enquiry into the events of Bloody Sunday in Northern Ireland in 1972 have required the records of the earlier enquiry to be copied and used over again as part of the evidence. A number of historians, like Robert Hume, a literary historian, have made this connection with the practices of lawyers and their evidential and judgmental role. Hume counsels against abandoning textual criticism in literary studies just because we cannot know in an absolute sense what the author or what the

38 *U-571* (Universal Films, 2000). This is, of course, a common film-making phenomenon where filmmakers are more concerned to attract (in this case) American audiences than to keep to the record, if even they recognize there is one. See <[www.pro.gov.uk/records management/acquisition/intro.htm](http://www.pro.gov.uk/records/management/acquisition/intro.htm)>.

39 The historian David Irving, well known for his extremist views, sued Deborah Lipstadt and her publishers, Penguin Books, in a libel trial heard in the High Court in London, 11 January 2000, for remarks about his use and misuse of records in her book, *Denying the Holocaust. The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (1994). He lost.

40 Andrew McDonald and Greg Terill, *Open Government. Freedom of Information and Privacy* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, 1998), p. 155.

41 “Early Equity Judges: Keepers of the Rolls of Chancery 1415–1447,” *The American Journal of Legal History* XXXVI, no. 4 (October 1992), pp. 441–65.

context means: “We cannot afford to abandon textual interpretation and retreat behind the Maginot Line of the Public Record Office.”⁴²

Thus, while welcoming the attention and insights Derrida and other post-modernists have given to archives, it is still necessary to draw the line between those who regard the record as having no particular distinctive characteristics from other texts, and those who recognize its “record-ness.” Richard Evans, when attacked as being a Rankean⁴³ for his views by some postmodernists, reiterated that “in so far as *In Defence of History* endorses ‘Rankeanism’, it is only in the very limited sense of insisting that the methods of source criticism introduced, not in the last few decades, but in the mid-nineteenth century by Leopold von Ranke himself, are still valid for historians today with modification, when they are analysing documents in the archive.” This seems not only sensible and un-exceptional to me as it relates to “how” to do history – and “how” to be a professional archivist as well as a professional historian in their different but intimately related roles in producing history. Other approaches are liable to be unprofessional and will not stand up to criticism of method, irrespective of the type of history being written and the stance of the historian concerned.

In the archival field itself, the archivist and historian Michael Moss has vigorously defended records and archives but also given archivists a challenge: “It is our duty as much as historians, literary scholars, and so on to reassert the primacy of the original source. In *Geschichtsforschung* [study of history] their centrality is not negotiable. We may argue about their interpretation and value; but defend them against those who contend that history is entirely self-referential we must.”⁴⁴ Patrick O’Brien, formerly director of the Institute of Historical Research in London, is even more resolute: “Furthermore, they and indeed all historians who stand accused in post-modern rhetoric of ‘fetishizing sources’, ‘sanctifying archives’ ... have taken it as read: that the significance of facts is not given by or embodied within the facts; that sources need to be contextualized [i.e., provenance in archival terms and much wider contextualization in historians’ terms]; that the languages and vocabularies of documents require careful translation and critical decoding [i.e., diplomatics in archival terms]; that correspondence between historical sources and a real or lived past is tenuous and established with difficulty.”⁴⁵

42 Robert D. Hume, *Reconstructing Contexts. The Aims and Principles of Archaeo-Historicism* (Oxford, 1999), p. 192. I am indebted to Ian Willison for drawing Robert Hume’s work to my attention. I would rather not be described as a Maginot line and certainly not be behind it in view of what happened, but I know what he means!

43 See Evans, *In Defence of History*, p. 275.

44 Michael Moss, “The Scent of the Slow Hound and the Snap of the Bull-Dog: The Place of Research in the Archival Profession,” in Margaret Proctor and C.P. Lewis, eds., *New Directions in Archival Research* (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 7–19.

But the attempt must be made and only the records selected, sometimes just left to survive by us and others in the past, allow us to do this. Of course we know that most of the record is destroyed and that there are no or few records for some people at all. As long ago as 1912, R.H. Tawney memorably described the difficulty of getting beyond the bare economic facts of ordinary people's lives in Tudor England: "Of the hopes and fears and aspirations of the men who tilled the fields ... we know hardly more than of the Roman plebs, far less than of the democracy of Athens. Yet these men too had their visions. Their silence is the taciturnity of men, not the speechlessness of dumb beasts."⁴⁶

For those who were and are recorded, their records were created, then selected or just survived long enough to join the archive. The record or archive has been built up normally according to the wishes of their creators and their successors, including archivists. Other records are being and have been destroyed, often the majority. The inherent biases in these processes are now obvious to our less deferential and more sceptical age, including the present recognition of the biases of the selector/archivist of the past and of the present. Derrida offers a view of this archiving context beyond our normal professional concerns and one which has value for us in repositioning what we do within culture and politics. Archivists must deal as best we may in the light of this self-knowledge and within the chronological and record-limited framework of history.

Thus, for the archivist, the continuing role remains to help to produce an archiving resolution of these tensions between what should be kept and what should be destroyed, what should be open and what should be closed or secret for our societies and individuals and, most importantly, for passing on to future generations. In doing this we need to describe that archival method of resolution so that it is clear what we select, preserve, and make accessible and thus what we mean by "context" and by "authentic" and "reliable" records. This is all the more urgent now as the current record is increasingly digital and its selection, preservation, and access over time for the future means we need to redefine our definitions of the record and its "record-ness," and what custody, authenticity, and provenance mean, and build in both the legal and procedural frameworks necessary at the point when the digital systems and their consequent records are created. Archivists cannot wait thirty years or more if they are to be able to keep the record for the future and maintain the trust people have in them to do that. Thereby the record, or should I perhaps say a trace, of what happened in the past will continue for the present and the future.

45 P.K. O'Brien, "An Engagement with Post-Modern Foes, Literary Theorists and Friends on the Borders with History," *Reviews in History* (<reviews-list@ihr.sas.ac.uk>). Cited in Moss.

46 R.H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1912), p. 121.