

# Book Reviews



**The Newton Papers: The Strange and True Odyssey of Isaac Newton's Manuscripts.** SARAH DRY. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xi, 238 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-995104-8.

*The Newton Papers* is one of a growing number of books that examine archives but do not appear to be written by or for archival specialists. Its author, Sarah Dry, formerly a research fellow at the London School of Economics, describes herself as an “independent scholar.”<sup>1</sup> Dry says little about her intended audience, but *The Newton Papers* seems to be aimed at a generalist readership. Unusually for a book about archives, it is published by a major international publishing house.

As its subtitle suggests, *The Newton Papers* provides a case study of custodial history. In recent years, as readers of *Archivaria* will know, custodial history has become a subject of increasing interest to archivists and users of archives. It determines what materials have survived, whether they are available for consultation, and where they are to be found; in *The Newton Papers*, all these issues are of primary concern. Archival scholarship also acknowledges that the impact of custodial history is not simply a matter of access; the evolving histories of archives over time and space determine the shape of archives and transform the way we encounter them.<sup>2</sup> Historians, too, have increasingly recognized that archives “are not unproblematic presences”<sup>3</sup> but are filtered by the vicissitudes they suffer.

- 1 See *The Newton Papers* (blog), “About Sarah Dry,” <http://sarahdry.wordpress.com/about/>.
- 2 Heather MacNeil, “Archivalterity: Rethinking Original Order,” *Archivaria* 66 (Fall 2008): 1–24, esp. 14–21.
- 3 Warren C. Brown, Marios Costambeys, Matthew Innes, and Adam J. Kosto, eds., *Documentary Culture and the Laity in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12.

Interest in custodial histories is not wholly new. Among the published guides to archival resources on my office shelves, in many ways the most intriguing is *A Guide to the Papers of British Cabinet Ministers*, issued by the Royal Historical Society in 1974.<sup>4</sup> Instead of simply listing holdings of archival repositories, it describes inquiries made of family members, friends, lawyers, executors, and others who might be expected to know about the custody of papers of the distinguished – and not so distinguished – politicians who held Cabinet positions in the UK between 1900 and 1951. In some cases, the stories they told were of papers donated to an archival institution or carefully guarded in a family home; others, however, told of papers that had been depleted, mislaid, stolen, rendered inaccessible, or lost from sight after their loan to a potential biographer. Several archives had been divided among a number of custodians, sometimes in different countries. Although the politicians' papers were only a few decades old when the *Guide* was compiled, they had already begun their journeys of custodial adventure.

In *The Newton Papers*, Dry narrates the custodial adventures of the papers of another distinguished Briton, the scientist Isaac Newton. In a brief prologue, she says that her book “tells the story of Newton’s papers ... and ... tracks the history of thoughts that Newton put to paper across the long span of his life” (p. 4). The book opens with an account of Newton’s death in 1727, and thirteen further chapters, arranged largely chronologically, take Dry’s story down to the start of the twenty-first century. According to Dry, Newton was an incessant note taker; his papers include numerous notebooks and memoranda, besides letters and drafts of unpublished treatises, on theology and history as well as science. These papers have endured a journey of almost three hundred years. When Newton died childless and intestate, a dispute arose among members of his family regarding the disposition of his belongings, including his papers, but most of the latter passed to a single heir who had married Newton’s niece. Much of the initial interest was in Newton’s theological rather than his scientific papers, and some of the theological papers were separated from the main collection in 1755; they passed through a number of private hands before being donated to New College, Oxford, in the 1870s. The bulk of the papers, however, remained intact and largely inaccessible for more than a century at Hurstbourne Park, a country house in Hampshire owned by the descendants of Newton’s niece. In 1872, the scientific papers and much of the rest of the collection were entrusted to Cambridge University, where they were placed in the custody of a “syndicate”

4 Cameron Hazlehurst and Christine Woodland, *A Guide to the Papers of British Cabinet Ministers* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1974).

of four scholars, who kept them for sixteen years before the scientific papers were moved to the University Library and the non-scientific papers sent back to Hurstbourne Park. In 1936, all the Newton papers remaining in Hampshire were sold at Sotheby's auction house in London and were divided among thirty-seven buyers, mainly dealers. Many of these papers were subsequently reunited through the initiatives of two men, J.M. Keynes and A. Yahuda, each of whom made numerous purchases from the dealers; Keynes's collection is now in King's College, Cambridge, and Yahuda's in the National Library of Israel. Other items, however, remained separated and some have disappeared without trace. In recent years, transcripts of many of Newton's dispersed papers have been made available online, not least by the Newton Project at the University of Sussex,<sup>5</sup> and Cambridge University Library has digitized its Newton material.<sup>6</sup> According to the dust jacket of *The Newton Papers*, the once forgotten papers have been rediscovered and "finally" been made public, but others may see digitization of the papers and publication of transcripts simply as further steps in the papers' journey, which will continue into an indefinite future.

At almost 240 pages, *The Newton Papers* is far longer than any of the entries in the *Guide* to Cabinet ministers' papers, where even the destiny of Winston Churchill's papers merits only five paragraphs. Archivists approaching *The Newton Papers* may wonder how its author has extended a custodial history to make a book of this length. The answer lies not merely in the longer timespan covered by *The Newton Papers* or the provision of more detail, but also in Dry's decision to include material of a more wide-ranging nature. For example, she supplies an outline biography, frequently extending to two pages or more, of almost every individual who figures in her story; while often fascinating, these character sketches sometimes interrupt the flow of her narrative. Further, substantial amounts of text are devoted to the history of Newtonian scholarship, the cultural climates in which it operated, and changing attitudes to Newton and his work.

From an archival viewpoint, there are also unexpected gaps in Dry's account. For example, she says little about how the papers were kept by their various custodians; she tells us that, during their years in Hampshire, they "would have nestled in a library, or a strong room near a library" (p. 117), but does not comment further on their storage. She refers to the papers as a "complex archive" (p. 142), but the impact of their adventures on the shape of the archive as a conceptual whole is handled very superficially. The apparent

5 The Newton Project, accessed 30 December 2014, <http://www.newtonproject.sussex.ac.uk>.

6 Cambridge Digital Library, "Newton Papers," accessed 30 December 2014, <http://cdl.lib.cam.ac.uk/collections/newton>.

disorder of the papers is occasionally mentioned, but there is no detailed analysis of their interrelationship or arrangement. The emphasis is firmly on their importance as a window on Newton's genius, their accessibility (or lack of accessibility) to the scholarly world, and their value to the emerging discipline of the history of science.

Dry has previously published work on a variety of scientific topics, and her enthusiasm for scientific scholarship is apparent throughout *The Newton Papers*. The hero of her story is Newton himself, and the main supporting cast are the scholars of later centuries who have sought knowledge of him from the books and papers of his era. She is also well acquainted with the literature on book dealing and collecting. Dealers in books and manuscripts feature prominently in later chapters, where she devotes considerable space to analyzing their activities and motivations. Regrettably, however, archival institutions and their staff have only a walk-on part in her account; *The Newton Papers* shows no recognition that their actions in arranging, describing, conserving, and providing access also contribute to the journeys that archives undergo. Archivists and librarians are acknowledged as suppliers of historical information for the book, but no archival literature is cited and archival science has not contributed to the book's conceptual framework.

For the most part, *The Newton Papers* is both erudite and entertaining. It has been well received by historians and scientists, but its failure to engage with archival thinking will inevitably be seen as a weakness by most readers of *Archivaria*. Dry illuminates the scholarly uses to which the papers have been put and the understandings that different users have brought to them at different times, but always in the context of the study of Newton and his achievements. She writes of the "dynamism of the archive" (p. 202), but the dynamism she has in mind is one that reflects and reveals the dynamism of Newton's mind. If the papers have uses in other contexts, or if other kinds of dynamism are at work, these are absent from her discussion. Moreover, although the book is ostensibly concerned with the history of Newton's own papers, large parts of it are devoted to "Newton-related objects" (p. 127), including letters by Newton that now form part of their recipients' archives, documents in which he is mentioned, and copies of his printed works. From Dry's point of view, all of these are resources for Newtonian scholarship; her interest in traces of Newton in papers other than Newton's own is understandable, but archivists in search of a focused analysis of Newton's *fonds d'archives* may be disconcerted by the turns her discussion sometimes takes. The Newton Project, of which her husband is director, is similarly catholic in scope.

Although the subtitle of her book refers to the odyssey of Newton's manuscripts as "strange," checkered custodial histories are not uncommon (as a glance at the *Guide to the Papers of British Cabinet Ministers* will easily demonstrate). The adventures described in *The Newton Papers* are similar to

those of the papers of the seventeenth-century diplomat Richard Fanshawe, about which I have written elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Most archivists will know many other examples. The story of the peregrinations of Newton's papers is well worth reading, but is not as unusual as the book's title suggests.

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**The Allure of the Archives.** ARLETTE FARGE. Translated by Thomas Scott-Railton. Foreword by Natalie Zemon Davis. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013. xvi, 131 pp. ISBN 978-0-300-17673-5.

*The Allure of the Archives*, by the historian Arlette Farge, is an English translation of her *Le goût de l'archive*, first published in French in 1989. Farge, director of research in modern history at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, is the author or co-author of close to thirty books on aspects of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. A postmodernist, Farge's interest is in power relationships and in the lives of women, the poor, and the criminal in eighteenth-century France. Farge makes her postmodern stance clear in this book, arguing against the "tedious gloss" (p. 73) of positivist historical analysis, instead urging the researcher to dig deep into the facts in order to extract and interpret the untold stories of history, in her case the stories of the French underclass, whose lives are documented in police records and judicial archives found in the French National Archives and in the Library of the Arsenal, housed in the National Library in France.

The ostensible purpose of this book is to orient the historical researcher, neophyte or other, to the nature of archival research, with examples drawn from the author's particular experience with eighteenth-century French judicial archives. But the book also immerses the reader in the sense – the actual physical sensation – of working in an archival institution, of feeling and smelling and hearing the crackle of historical documents, in an effort to expose the researcher to the enormity of the documentary legacy resting in archival repositories.

Describing the research task as unsettling and colossal, Farge suggests that "these numerous and ample archival *fonds*, stored in library basements, bring to mind the hulking masses of rock in the Atlantic, called *basses*, that are visible only twice a year, during the lowest tides" (pp. 4–5). As Farge notes, her goal is to reach beyond facts and acts to draw out the "excess of meaning"

7 Geoffrey Yeo, "Custodial History, Provenance, and the Description of Personal Records," *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 44, no.1 (2009): 50–64.