

Counterpoint

The Archivist's Two-Way Stretch*

Several years ago, President Ali Soilih of the Comoro Islands, after seizing power in the former French territories, fired most of the civil servants, had all the government records hauled into the town square of the capital, and there burned them. He then declared a "new start".¹ Soilih was acting as a "records manager" and was exercising the function of records disposal. It is all very well to smile at Soilih's precipitous action, but it differs only in its comprehensiveness and visibility from what records managers do every day. What is the purpose of a records manager? From the historian's point of view, it should be, to quote Renée Doehaerd: "satisfying the curiosity of the historians of the future".² From the government administrator's point of view, it should be responsiveness to the administrative requirements of economy and efficiency.

Although the archival profession was created, led, and nurtured by historians, historians are now, as the Council of the American Historical Association stated in its Resolution concerning the status of the National Archives, 27 December 1966, "greatly outnumbered by those trained in the new techniques of records management".³ Are the qualifications of a records manager identical with those of an archivist trained in the traditional historical mold? Not really. Ernst Posner's 1957 presidential address to the Society of American Archivists (SAA), in analyzing the results of the Society's questionnaire to its members, noted but a single doctorate among the one hundred and twelve records administrators.⁴

Archivists have grappled with the problem of the conflicting values of traditional archivists and the new breed of records managers in various ways, but almost invariably have attempted to ignore or paper-over real differences in favor of an assumed unity of purpose and outlook. W. Kaye Lamb, in his presidential address before the SAA in 1965, proclaimed that "the archivist has ceased to be primarily a custodian—a caretaker—and has become a gatherer of records and manuscripts"; he has assumed a "dynamic" and "active" role to supplant his formerly "largely

* A revised version of an address delivered to The Use of Archives symposium held at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., 4-6 October 1976, entitled "Reflections of an historian about archives past and present with special reference to the United States".

1 Letter from Comoros, *Washington Post*, 20 August 1978, A36. Ali Soilih, who seized power in 1975, was deposed in May of 1978 and murdered shortly thereafter. Despatch by David Lamb, *Washington Post*, 30 October 1978, A20.

2 Renée Doehaerd, "Remarks on Contemporary Archives", *American Archivist* 13 (1950): 323-328, at 325.

3 *American Archivist* 30 (1967): 390-392, at 390.

4 Ernst Posner, "What, Then, Is the American Archivist, This New Man?" *American Archivist* 20 (1957): 3-11, at 5.

passive" role.⁵ Lamb's observations may be valid for the recent past, as the present generation of "professional archivists" free themselves from timidity and rigidity, but it does not do justice to the pre-professional state of the archival profession when "gatherers of records and manuscripts" provided the motive force for the creation of archives. The movement toward the creation of state archives was most successful in states which had no strong private collecting societies, but the motive power was almost invariably supplied by the "gatherers"—not the "custodians".

Before the founding of the formal archives in the United States, historians or historically oriented individuals like Peter Force, Ebenezer Hazard, Jared Sparks, and Richard Bartlett took the initiative to preserve the records of the colonies and of the fledgling United States for the purpose of historical study. Later, with the founding of formal archival institutions, historians again took the lead. Thomas Owens, in Alabama, the founder of the Alabama Historical Society, was instrumental in creating the Department of Archives and History of the State of Alabama in 1901. Franklin Riley in Mississippi performed the same function there in 1902. The state historical societies in Wisconsin and Minnesota, in part because of their close association with the universities of their states, have assumed official archival functions in their states. The National Archives shows a similar origin. The American Historical Association, which was founded in 1884, created a Public Archives Commission in 1899. It was that Public Archives Commission which laid the groundwork for the creation of a formal archival system in the United States leading to the National Archives, created in 1934 as an independent agency under the successive leadership of historians R.D.W. Conners and Solon J. Buck.

A counter-group to the historically oriented founders arose in the 1930s. This group talked of improving "professional" skills, by which they meant archival rather than historical skills. I (following Ernst Posner) would date the beginning of this movement with Margaret C. Norton's 1930 paper, delivered at the meeting of the National Association of State Libraries, on "The Archives Department as an Administrative Unit in the Government." Norton stated that the time had come to stress proper care of archives as an administrative problem of state government rather than as a mere adjunct to the historical library.⁶ The initiative for the administrative approach to archives, it will be noted, came not from historians but from one of the new "professionals" in the field. The influence of Norton's conviction that archival materials were primarily the government's legal and administrative documentation and only secondarily research material for the historian, became, by 1964, as Ernst Posner put it, "a generally accepted tenet of archivists in the United States."

Once archives had been set up under the guiding hand of historians or historically trained administrators, the historical profession assumed that the job was done and all was well. In fact a silent crisis arose after the war which caught the historians napping. In 1950 the National Archives lost its independence and became a branch of the General Services Administration (GSA). The once proud title of Archivist of the United States remained, but the occupant found himself standing hat in hand even to get his travel papers signed by the GSA administrator. Simultaneous with the loss of independence was the reorganization of the Archives to its present form of National Archives and Records Service. In addition to historically trained archivists, the National Archives and Records Service now included a corps of "records managers", as recommended by the January 1949 report of a task force set up to consider government reorganization. The reorganization occurred without formal protest from the

5 W. Kaye Lamb, "The Changing Role of the Archivist", *American Archivist* 29 (1966): 3-10, at 4.

6 National Association of State Libraries, *Proceedings and Addresses* (1930): 44-48, cited in Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago, 1964), pp. 25, 30.

American Historical Association, which had been instrumental in the creation of the National Archives. No one has satisfactorily explained why historians did not protest, but the fact that the American Historical Association was at the time guided by a superannuated executive director, Guy Stanton Ford, operating out of two tiny study rooms in the annex of the Library of Congress may help to explain it. The most charitable explanation is that, as part of a government-wide reorganization designed to cut down on the number of officials reporting to the president, the reform was accepted in the spirit of good citizenship. It was not until the American Historical Association's resolution of 1966, previously cited, that the reorganization was denounced as "the sudden and almost cavalier decision of 1949 which had in its favor neither precedent nor considered examination by archivists and historians".⁷ The question of the proper status of the National Archives has agitated historians since that time, with an increasing number moving to the position that the Archives should be independent of any executive office.⁸

No one will deny the need for records management, particularly in the face of the paper explosion that followed World War II. But when archives began to pass from the hands of the historians who created them to the hands of the "professional archivists" who inherited them, there was not sufficient concern for the implications of this shift. Posner, who was committed in many ways to the new approach, nevertheless worried that the historical function might become the "Cinderella" of the operation. I cannot agree with Artel Ricks that the fear of some archivists and historians (that the association of archives and records management might lead to the domination of efficiency over scholarship) was "unwarranted".⁹ I feel that it was, and continues to be, a problem. This is not to deny that the archivist can be an historian and the historian, an archivist. But by emphasizing housekeeping and administrative functions, the archivists have played into the hands of those whose values are not those of the founders of the profession. Those values are the dictates of scholarship: maximum scholarly access to the greatest number of sources, and the obligation to truth above all values.

The values of administrators of government departments are to make themselves, their departments, and their political bosses look good: at best by *suppressio veri*; at worse, by *suggestio falsi*. At the Smithsonian Institution Joseph Henry, the first Secretary, was constantly worried that the United States government would turn the Institution into a political football which would ultimately be administered by political appointees who did not have the Smithsonian's basic commitment to truth, scholarship and the advancement of knowledge. The Smithsonian has been able to keep the government from grossly distorting its original purpose, though the Institution has been occasionally strongly influenced by non-scholarly goals. I do not believe, as Guy DuBoscq suggested in his paper at the Congress of Archivists meeting in Washington in 1976 that archivists "found it necessary to draw closer to the government departments" in order to obtain the funds required to maintain archives in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Certainly, as F. Gerald Ham has noted,¹¹ records

7 Resolution as printed in *American Archivist* 30 (1967): 390-392, at 392.

8 The early history of the interaction between historians and the National Archives is discussed in Lester J. Cappon, "The National Archives and the Historical Profession", *Journal of Southern History* 35, no. 4 (Nov. 1969): 477-499. For the early role of the American Historical Association in the creation of the National Archives, see William F. Birdsall, "The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian, 1909-1935", *American Archivist* 38 (1975): 159-173.

9 Artel Ricks, "Records Management as an Archival Function", VIII International Congress on Archives, Washington, D.C., 27 September—1 October 1976, 1-27, at 19.

10 Guy Duboscq, "The Records Center: Idea and Instrument", *ibid.*, 1-10 at 2.

11 F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Standards and the Posner Report: Some Reflections on the Historical Society Approach", *American Archivist* 28 (1965): 223-230, at 229.

management can be more easily “sold” to state legislators than the preservation of historical records, but the *necessity* of doing so may be doubted, while the danger of accommodating a scholarly purpose to an expedient method should be obvious. Nor is it enough to say, with the Society of American Archivists, that records management and archives should be under the unified control of archivists with historical training. Studies made by the Society of American Archivists itself show that records management is often *not* under the control of the archivists, even the archivist-manager type, in various states and foreign countries. Posner’s 1964 study indicated “a definite trend to absorb in administrative or fiscal departments formerly independent agencies that are responsible for both archival and record management activities”.¹² Does that trend continue? Kaye Lamb had noted that records disposal is the “most difficult problem relating to records management”.¹³ Uses made by records managers of current documents (such as land grants, Lamb noted) are often totally different from the uses made of the same documents by scholars of later generations. Hence it is disquieting to think that the decision on what is to be retained and what kept is being made by the persons least trained in traditional historical scholarship among the archivists with whom they identify.

The character of the archivist, as well as the functions and responsibilities of the archives, are important. If the archivist is *not* identified as a scholar whose natural and instinctive commitment is to truth before administrative convenience, his word may not be taken seriously. He will be seen as another government employee serving at and for the convenience of his administrative bosses. The character of the archivist’s boss is also very important. In Britain the Lord Chancellor is the “boss” of the Keeper of the Public Records and occupies a position of great dignity, responsibility, and legal authority. Yet he exercises his control in a detached fashion which provides one of the best types of links to government. In Canada, I understand, the Dominion Archivist reports to the Secretary of State. In the United States, however, the head of the Government Services Administration is the boss of the Archivist of the United States.¹⁴ In the Carter administration “GSA” is coming to mean corruption and scandal on a scale unmatched by previous American scandals. The extent and implications of this fraud are only now emerging. A more relevant example (since the National Archives is as yet untouched by the scandals of 1978) is the furor over the Nixon presidential papers. The agreement that was made between President Nixon and the GSA administrator, allowing Mr. Nixon to take and destroy any of the tapes that he wished, was made without the knowledge of the Archivist of the United States. Mr. Rhoads read about the agreement in the newspaper after it had been made. To his credit, he protested, and the agreement was later successfully challenged in the courts by several professional organizations of historians and political scientists—but not by the professional organization of archivists. The Society of American Archivists has always had a close relationship with the National Archives. Perhaps this explains its sensitivity to criticism and its reluctance to join fully with historians and political scientists in challenging executive privilege on behalf of more open archives. Nor are American archival journals noted for the frequency of articles expressing dissent or a questioning of the assumptions of the profession. Indeed, F. Gerald Ham in his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists of 1974 asserted that “You search archival literature in vain to find something more helpful than a ‘how we did it here’ article on a particular collecting program or an essentially ‘nuts and bolts’ piece on the mechanics of collecting”.¹⁵

The historian’s role and the records administrator’s role are both to select among the

12 Posner, *American State Archives* p. 313.

13 Lamb, *American Archivist* 29 (1966): 3-10, at 6.

14 For further elaboration see especially Walter Robertson, Jr., “NARS: The Politics of Placement”, *American Archivist* 39 (1976): 485-492.

15 F. Gerald Ham, “The Archival Edge”, *American Archivist* 38 (1975): 5-13, at 7.

myriad facts before them. It is important that their definitions of what is important, and what is not, coincide. As Wilfred Smith, the Dominion Archivist, has noted, the criteria problem (what to select) is the greatest issue in archival management and is the area where there is the least expertise and developed knowledge.¹⁶ It is hard to tell what data will be useful to the historian of the future because the historian constantly comes up with new ways of looking at things. There are presently quantitative, sociological, psychological and other approaches which can revolutionize the traditional canons of selection. Cliometricians, psychohistorians and even folklorists have taught us to see the past in different ways. No two groups will readily agree on the criteria by which historical data should be selected.

Consider the role of machine readable archives. It is instructive that historians, not archivists, generated the demand for such archives. Lionel Bell, in his talk to the Eighth International Congress of Archivists, noted that many archivists are unwilling even to consider, let alone get involved with, machine readable data.¹⁷ In this field, as Bell pointed out, the archivist, in selecting material for retention, has a greater need (than he does in dealing with other collections) of having an *idea* of what further processing into source material for other purposes future users will be able to achieve. In other words, since machine readable archives are significant more for their *informational* content than for themselves as objects, the archivist as administrator finds them harder to deal with than the archivist as historian. The National Archives and Records Service of the United States has fortunately chosen an historian, Charles Dollar, from the University of Oklahoma, to run its machine readable archives.

How does the split between historical versus administrative approaches affect the collection and use of private papers? I would assert that the more administrative-minded the archivist is, the more official he becomes and the more distant he gets from historical reality. The official records of the Viet Nam War are of enormous quantity but give a poor picture of the war. I am told that General Westmoreland was so reliant upon official papers that he was unaware of the implications of the anti-war movement at home for his military mission.

The statement of standards for state archival agencies of the Society of American Archivists recommends *against* collecting private papers as a general rule unless *assigned* such responsibility by appropriate authority and provided with "special staff". If assigned such responsibility, state archival agencies (according to the Society) should emphasize the acquisition of papers of residents of the state "who have been prominent in the public affairs of the United States and of the state and its subdivision". This statement smacks of official/administrative bias. It makes archivists the target for the charge that they are elitist or, as Howard Zinn asserted in a paper some years ago before American archivists, flunkies of the establishment.¹⁸ A more historically minded approach would be that of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin which actively collected data on the civil rights movement in the South in the 1960s. The action of the State Historical Society reminds me of the action of the Boston Athenaeum in collecting Southern newspapers after the Civil War. So effectively was the job done that the best collection of wartime newspapers of the South during the Civil War is located in Boston at the Athenaeum.

16 Wilfred I. Smith, remarks at The Use of Archives symposium, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C., 4-6 October 1976.

17 Lionel Bell, "The Archival Implications of Readable Records", VIII International Congress on Archives, Washington, D.C., 27 September—1 October 1976, 1-18, at 11 and 16. Bell is now with the British Library after many years at the Public Record Office, London.

18 Howard Zinn, "The Activist Archivist", in session on "The Archivist and the New Left", during the thirty-fourth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Washington, D.C., 30 September 1970.

It is not a question of the archivist being a radical and opposing the government or the "establishment". An activist archivist, as I would define him, is one who collects beyond the traditional scope of his fellow archivists in order to facilitate the study of the period in which he is collecting. He collects the material of the counter-culture as well as of the official culture not because he believes in it but because he has the historian's mentality. That mentality, as I like to define it, follows John Quincy Adams' definition of an historian. "An historian," Adams wrote, "should have neither religion nor country".¹⁹ Nor, might I add, should he, in his capacity as an historian, represent any other special interest group.

What an archivist wants to do as an individual citizen is his own business. But as *an historian*, the archivist should attempt to maximize the amount of useful information about all groups, and test hypotheses, historical and otherwise, about them. And there are many theories: the old trumpet-and-drum history, the Great Man theory, the "new" social history approach, and the Marxist theoretical formulations about historical events. The theory does not matter. The point is that information from many sources is necessary to test theories in the market place of ideas. This requires collecting ideas from any source, not just from official sources.

The administrative distaste for mixing unofficial and official papers does not prevent the National Archives and Records Service from assuming jurisdiction of presidential libraries, which have a mix of public and private papers. The line has been further blurred in the new role of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC)—the old National Historical Publication Commission which never got out of the field of supporting the publication of the papers of famous Americans until 1974 when it was redesignated as the NHPRC. The new organization is now encouraging the creation of state historical records coordinators and advisory boards. The term "historical records" is significant. It was one of those terms that got lost in the assumption of responsibility for, and administration of, archives in the early 1930s. The NHPRC is also establishing an historical records grants program to assist state and local governments and non-profit institutions to preserve and make available the historical records of the United States of America. Frank Burke, the Executive Director of that Commission, has provided some examples of how they are actively seeking to encourage the preservation of certain unofficial materials, such as the archives of individual railroads consolidated into CONRAIL. Normally, the disposition of those records would have been left to some railroad administrator and probably would have been thrown out. Whenever there is a reorganization, many things get discarded. In a study of the Dawes Act (General Allotment Law) of 1887 which broke up the tribal land holdings in the United States, the charge was examined that railroads played a strong role in creating and promoting that Act. Nineteenth century railroad archives, where they could be found, were combed unsuccessfully to see if anything could be located to support this charge. From the records that remain in the archives of the United States, it is impossible to validate this charge. When questions arise in the future about the role of the railroad companies in the last twenty to thirty years, it will be more possible to answer those questions because of the encouragement given by the NHPRC.

Is there a correlation between poor archives, limited access to archives, and the dominance of administrative over historical values in archives which do exist *and* poor scholarship and a low level of personal freedom in the countries where these conditions exist? I advance this as an hypothesis, not as a statement, uncertain how it would apply in many countries of the world. I have always been curious about the metaphysical state of scholarship in certain places in Latin America and the absence of substantial documentation in many Latin American historical works. I wonder at the relationship

¹⁹ John Quincy Adams to Brantz Mayer, 6 July 1847, letterbook, Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, microfilm reel 155.

between the level of scholarship and the level of the archives in such countries. What about Canada? Ralph Nader tells us that Canadian historians now receive information about their own government from the United States government, by use of the US Freedom of Information Act when requests for such information directly would be barred in Canada by the Official Secrets Act.²⁰ In the United States the user, the consumer, the historian has greater rights than those of any country I know. The administrator, the official, is forced to make his purposes conform to those of the consumer. The burden of proof is on the administrator as to why he wishes to deny access rather than upon the citizen to show why he wishes access.

An inducement for archivists to stay on the historical track may derive from the the comparatively low status of the archivist-administrator in contrast to that of the archivist-historian. Herman Kahn, in his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists of 1970, pointed out the archivist's status insecurity in dealing with the scholarly professions.²¹ The exclusion of the Society of American Archivists from the American Council of Learned Societies, the paucity of archivists on the Advisory Council of the National Archives, the failure of the American Historical Association and Organization of American Historians to put an archivist on a committee concerned with the investigation of archives, are all signs of the archivist's questionable legitimacy in the eyes of his begetters.

Archivists can take either the scholarly or the administrative paths that now co-exist within the archival profession. I, for one, would urge that archivists take to heart Ernst Posner's warning (in his 1957 presidential address to the Society of American Archivists) never to "separate the umbilical cord that connects us with the mother body of the historical profession".²²

Wilcomb Washburn
Director, Office of American Studies
Smithsonian Institution

20 *Georgia Straight*, 30 September—7 October 1976.

21 Herman Kahn, "Some Comments on the Archival Vocation", *American Archivist* 34 (1971): 3-12 at 9 and 12.

22 Posner, "What, Then, Is the American Archivist, This New Man?" *American Archivist* 3-11, at 7.