

## *Book Reviews*

### BOOK REVIEW #1

**The Arrangement and Description of Archival Materials.** HUGH A. TAYLOR. With a contribution, "Les Instruments de Reserches dans les Archives," by Etienne Taillemite. Munich, New York, London and Paris: K.G. Sauer (International Council on Archives Handbook Series, Vol. 2), 1980. 181 pp.

"We ask of the critics much criticism." Brave words, this injunction from Miller, Feith, and Fruin, with which Hugh Taylor begins his manual, *The Arrangement and Description of Archival Materials*, for the International Council on Archives. The author audacious enough to start with such an invitation, one suspects, had better know what he is talking about. Because it is either modest integrity, promising to deliver much, or it is subtle prolepsis, attempting to defuse a bad situation. Mr. Taylor's credentials and long experience in the archival profession offer little doubt that he knows what he is talking about. His introduction certainly promises much, despite the customary qualifications. Why, then, am I left at the end feeling I ought to take the author precisely at his word: "Archivists should never rely on manuals alone, least of all on this one"?

Mr. Taylor is quite right in his initial assertion that the archival profession "has not been overburdened with methodology." He points to the need for a revision of the consideration of standards in the basic works of Muller, Feith, and Fruin, Jenkinson, Schellenberg, and others, in the light of modern developments. Aply placing each of these archival forbears within their own archival traditions and contexts, Taylor suggests that the circumstances of our rapidly changing archival world call for another manual that would, presumably, guide those now confronting such issues as decentralization, i.e. the proliferation of small and regional archives; the growth of specialized media archives; the impact of technology, especially electronic data processing; and with these developments, the increasing need for overall national, even international, standards of description that are reasonably compatible. No one denies that such a manual is urgently sought. Considering the issues, moreover, archivists would do well to heed Mr. Taylor's warnings about too keen a fascination with technology in the desire for a "scientific" methodology. "Technology will reproduce, diffuse, and re-order the information we identify," Taylor rightly perceives, "but it can *add* nothing." He does well to remind us that the basic principles rooted in common sense upon which the archival profession is founded have not changed. Nor can a book or manual be expected to replace the relationship between master and apprentice which is at the heart of an archivist's training and craft. Still, there is a place for manuals.

Given this auspicious beginning, what does this manual offer us? For one thing, it aims for some reason at novice archivists and librarians who want to understand archival problems of control and description. Working archivists, consequently, will find little in the way of basic principles and methodology that is not better elaborated in any of the earlier manuals. They may, indeed, be frequently taken aback by some suggestions, stunning in their obviousness. Helpful hints in the preparation of repository guides, for example: "Good design in the layout

of the contents is of paramount importance. . .” or “Be careful and consistent when indenting. . .” referring to the preparation of indexes. This, despite an early promise that “this manual will not provide mechanical, step by step instructions nor can it be used as a ‘cookbook’ full of simple recipes for success.” It is hard to see how the uninitiated could be left with any other view. To many of us familiar with the principles and practices discussed, however, it is a cookbook filled with some decidedly unsavoury recipes.

What we are in fact served up is yet another compilation of practices observed in the Public Archives of Canada, and not very much in the way of thoughtful analysis even of these. I, for one, am weary of the perpetual apologia from PAC archivists for the almost exclusive use of examples from that institution, “. . .not because they are necessarily better than those from other institutions, (you understand, but. . .)”. Perhaps the Public Archives does, after all, represent a standard of excellence among Canadian archives that denies gainsaying. Perhaps, also, there may be archival thought outside Ottawa. The constant use of PAC as standard, usually denied but applied anyhow, has less to do, I suspect, with methodological or procedural rectitude, than with the size, availability and potential of federal resources (of which, yes, I am entirely envious). It is possible to disagree with many of the prescriptions Mr. Taylor offers because there are alternatives, which he acknowledges, but does not feel compelled to outline beyond pointing to the bibliography. Instead, we get a faithful synopsis of the way things are done at the Public Archives, a reflection of that institution’s policies and structure.

I might not necessarily object to this, were it not that the manual raises issues which it subsequently does not face. The book seems to lack focus, co-ordination, an overview that would analyse, tie together, and offer some directions, if only tentative ones. Having introduced the issues, the author seems to abandon them in favour of soliciting from his colleagues summary descriptions of existing practices in each of the PAC divisions. These vary greatly, as does the quality and completeness of their explanations. Accessioning procedures, for instance, seem to differ widely from media to media. On the one hand, we are told that accession numbers have no permanent value once permanent “reference symbols” are assigned, and on the other, we see accession numbers used as permanent identifying symbols. This may be a small procedural point, but the various media repositories within the PAC seem also to differ in their fundamental understanding of the nature and purpose of accessioning, as they do on the relationship between arrangement and description. This comes as no news to the archival community, but it is scarcely encouraging to find yet another demonstration of it in a manual that pays lip service to the need for national and international standards. To the inexperienced archivist or librarian, the situation must be plain confusing. Despite cursory discussions of British and American experiences in the development of national guides and inventories, this manual is so bound up in PAC methodology that it cannot be regarded as international in scope.

Significantly, the most thoroughgoing discussion of principles of arrangement and description occurs in Part One, “Manuscript Textual Material, Including Public Records,” which takes up nearly half the manual, if not more of its emphasis. This is not hard to understand, since those principles evolved largely out of administering these kinds of materials, the same principles found in the early manuals the author readily acknowledges. Yet it is he who raises the issue of modern media archives and their implications in terms of established methodology, as well as the need for a revised manual to deal with them. In those terms, Part Two, “Other Media,” with its hodge-podge of often meagre, inconsistent offerings, is disappointing in the extreme. Really, why bother? Similarly, the manual dodges the important issue of EDP. “No attempt will be made in this manual to provide advice on arrangement and description in machine readable archives,” it intones, and “no attempt will be made here to describe EDP programs and systems in detail.” Such, we are told, is “a complex subject outside the scope of this manual.” What, therefore, is within the scope of the

manual, apart from a rehash of basic methodology better presented in earlier manuals. For detailed discussion of important issues, we must turn to something like Michael Cook's *Archives and the Computer*, London, 1980.

To leave the impression that there is nothing of value in this ICA Handbook would be misleading. For example, in the short Part Three, "Planning", we may disagree with specific recommendations, but the necessity for archives to plan comprehensively their strategies of acquisition, arrangement, and description is both practical wisdom and sound advice. The bibliography is useful — one wonders if the purposes of the ICA might not have been better served here by appending an expanded, possibly annotated bibliography to the author's introduction, and leaving it at that. In any event, we should not accept this manual as other than it purports, in fairness, to be—an elementary primer. Certainly, it is indispensable to anyone contemplating a career in the Public Archives of Canada. Notwithstanding this stricture, the book apparently lacks a clear sense of purpose, and a strong, guiding editorial hand to pull it all together and keep it on course. The elusive manual for the modern archival era remains to be written. Let us hope that Mr. Taylor, having so well defined the need, may soon turn his attention to the task.

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**Archives & Manuscripts: An Introduction to Automated Access.** H. THOMAS HICKERSON. Basic Manual Series. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1981. 60 p. ISBN 931828-29-5. \$5.00, pa.

As more and more archivists master the harnessing of electronic computer power to assist them in the various types of control they exercise over materials, a major hurdle becomes apparent. Like so many other groups in our society, archivists present a broad range of abilities regarding the use of computers, and that range is daily becoming even larger. At the leading edge, we have a few innovative individuals who are actively involved in the development of computer systems for archival use. Not far behind come those who are knowledgeable and ready to begin, but who are prevented by circumstances from putting their ideas into action. This growing group includes those who are emerging from educational programmes which include basic education in the use of computers. The others, the vast majority, exhibit a variety of skills and attitudes, but all too many know nothing beyond the hyperbole they encounter in the daily newspapers and popular magazines. They understand only vaguely references to computers in the professional literature, and most of the concepts embodied in automation are totally foreign and incomprehensible to them.

The problem is a serious one, and like most major problems relating to archival automation, it is organizational rather than technical. If archivists are to make effective and productive use of computers, they must do so in a co-ordinated way that will reduce redundant systems design and will encourage the kind of computer-based co-operation that has, to their own surprise, assisted librarians to cope with the same increase in recorded information that archivists face. The solution to the problem must lie in some form of education, of which this book forms a part, for knowledge and understanding about computers must become part of every archivist's professional equipment.