

Book Reviews

Working with History: The Historical Records Survey in Louisiana and the Nation, 1936-1942. BURL NOGGLE. Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University Press, 1981. ix, 139 p. ISBN 0-8071-0881-2 \$14.95.

Toward a Usable Past: Historical Records in the Empire State. A Report to the Governor and Citizens of New York by the State Historical Records Advisory Board, 1984. v, 74 p.

Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States. Consultant Reports Presented at the Conference of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission Assessment and Reporting Grantees, Atlanta, Ga., June, 1983. LISA B. WEBER, ed. Albany, N.Y.: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, n.d. ix, 71 p.

When archival programmes draw special attention and funding from governments such beneficence seldom reflects a sudden interest in the social value of archives. It is usually due to other causes which only temporarily yield benefits to archives. The publications under review here are good examples of this. They also demonstrate the essential vulnerability of archives when programme developments and public profiles are advanced only by such happenstance.

The three books deal with two major federally funded projects in the United States, the Historical Records Survey of the 1930s and the State Historical Records Assessment and Reporting Projects of 1982. The fact that fifty years separates them is not insignificant. Long-term attention has seldom been paid to archival activities in North America. From the results of the latest American endeavour it seems unlikely that the situation will change.

Noggle's book is an historical assessment of the work done by the Historical Records Survey during the depression. Although his purpose is to consider the nation-wide scope of the survey, he has focused his attention on one state project, that of Louisiana, in examining the detailed workings and achievements of the venture. The result is a careful analysis of the survey that does not get bogged down in chronicles of individual state operations. He examines the relations between the central planners and the state authorities and makes cogent comparisons between states, leaving a clear understanding of the survey's work in Louisiana, the other states, and the nation as a whole.

The tremendous importance of the Historical Records Survey lies in the basic work of physical location, sorting, listing, and storage it did in order to bring local government and other community records under archival care for the first time after more than a century of neglect in Louisiana's case. The survey, which began as an outgrowth of the Federal Writers' Project of the New Deal Works Progress Administration, was not the result of concern for archives (except by those who promoted and administered it) but concern for job creation. Nevertheless, the benefits to archives were very real and measurable in terms of counties surveyed (90 per cent of the nation's 3,066 counties) and inventories completed (over 1,700 inventories, calendars, and guides were published). This work represented an enormous store of records found and preserved.

It is particularly alarming, therefore, to read in Noggle's postscript that when the survey ended in 1942, it was forgotten. Many of its inventories and records were lost or destroyed, and many of the archives it saved were once more neglected and abandoned. The survey's object was not, after all, to save archives but to create jobs. What it had not done was convince the public that its work was more than "make-work." The survey left behind no public interest in archives sufficient to ensure the preservation of its own work.

The circumstances surrounding the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) projects were even more ominous. The commission arranged funding for the projects because impending Reagan budget cuts threatened the commission's future existence. It hoped to leave at least a planning base for archives before it disappeared, but the threat to the commission was suggestive of the priorities placed on archival programmes by the federal government. The projects were undertaken in the knowledge that public commitment to archives was not high on the list of spending priorities.

The New York report is one of twenty-seven prepared with NHPRC funding. In its analysis of the condition of archives in the state and in its recommendations, the report resembles the SSHRCC Wilson report on archives in Canada. That is no coincidence; Canada and the United States demonstrate similar levels of disregard for archives. It should be noted that the NHPRC supplied a copy of *Canadian Archives* to each of the state participants as a model. The report examined four aspects of archives preservation, state, government, local government, and non-governmental records, as well as problems common to the previous topics. The format was set by the NHPRC to cover all the important aspects of the archives community and to create some consistency in the individual state reports.

When the NHPRC survived the budget crisis of 1981-82, it took steps to complete the projects. Before making grants to the remaining states, the commission had the completed reports evaluated by four consultants, whose findings were reported to a meeting of participants in Atlanta, Georgia in 1983. The reports and the recommendations made by the conference participants were printed as *Documenting America*. In their evaluation of the individual reports and in their own recommendations the consultants played a useful role in synthesizing the previous year's work. But they, like the New York Board, limited themselves to essentially internal studies. They noted the many shortfalls in archival activity caused by lack of resources and recommended increased resources without ever really addressing the problem of convincing our potential financiers that we are worth their attention.

The two most devastating criticisms of these studies, as well as the SSHRCC study and the SAA's Goals and Priorities Task Force Report (GAP), were made by Terry Eastwood and David Bearman at the SAA Conference in Washington last year. First, Eastwood contended that such studies have not been properly used. They have been treated as discussion papers within the profession rather than the action documents they were intended to be. From references in *Documenting America* this criticism is not universally valid. Some Advisory Boards, including New York's, have not been content just to write a report. They have pressed their recommendations, in some cases successfully. But Eastwood's critique does apply to many such studies, not least the SSHRCC report.

Bearman's objection to the state reports and to the SAA's GAP Report is that they do not provide the kinds of information necessary to plan archives policies. Their basic failure is that they assume the very thing they must establish — the value and role of archives in the information community. To convince society that archives have value we must discover and explain our role. To do this we need to find out what institutions do and do not have archives and why, which people, seeking information, do and do not use archives and why, and what functions archives perform well or poorly and why. The list of questions goes on and on; the link is that they are inquiring about the world in which archives operate in an effort to locate our role in it. Such an inquiry allows for the possibility that we need to become something quite different from what we are now.

Information is needed to plan archives policies, but a different order of information from our previous attempts. Successive litanies on our poor resources have not convinced anyone that we deserve better. We must demonstrate the role we play, or can play, and its value to society. Only then is society likely to fund us as we would wish.

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Archives and Manuscripts. Machine-Readable Records. MARGARET L. HEDSTROM. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1984. Basic Manuals Series, 75 p. ISBN 0 931828 60 0 \$6.00 (members) \$8.00 (non-members).

Margaret Hedstrom has stripped automated records systems to the bone in her *Machine-Readable Records* manual. This latest offering from the remarkably helpful Society of American Archivists' basic manuals series does exactly what it sets out to do — to provide a step-by-step sequence by which archivists can come to grips with records-keeping systems fed by computers. Not only is this done in seventy-five pages, a good hour's easy reading (a compliment to the author), but Hedstrom is admirably plain and informative. She cuts through the technical paraphernalia and computer vocabulary in a very straightforward fashion without being simplistic.

The manual is quite simply organized into four chapters. Between them, they cover what a computer system amounts to, what the components of an automated records system are, how electronic data is organized from characters to file structures, what kind of devices are used to store it, how automated records are to be located, inventoried, scheduled, appraised, accessioned, processed, described, maintained, and made available for use. Diagrams are uncluttered and easily grasped. The inevitable glossary is built from