

## *Book Reviews*

**Committee on the Records of Government. Report.** ERNEST R. MAY et al. Washington: American Council of Learned Societies, the Social Science Research Council, and the Council on Library Resources, 1985. 191 p.

“The United States is in danger of losing its memory.” With this opening statement, designed to catch and hold the attention of readers, including, the authors clearly hope, those with the power to change the existing situation, this little volume begins its exposé of the state of government records in the United States and its prescription for change. No North American archivist involved with the appraisal and preservation of government records can afford to ignore this report, particularly if, as the authors claim, its findings are as applicable to the state and local levels of government as to the federal, and if, as I would contend, the Canadian scene is not that dissimilar. According to this report, governments at all levels have already lost control of paper records and are not in a position to deal effectively with records in new technological formats. The findings of the committee are based on an eighteen-month study of the existing literature and a series of information meetings with professional organizations and individuals. The report lists several conclusions. The huge quantities of paper records stored by government — there are 40 million cubic feet of U.S. federal executive branch records, of which 2 per cent are in the National Archives, 40 per cent in Federal Records Centres, and nearly 60 per cent within agencies — represent a monumental waste of resources. Many of these records should long since have been destroyed. Authorities are unable to separate easily the wheat from the chaff and users cannot retrieve needed information because of the haphazard way in which the records were created and maintained. The 19,000 medium- and large-sized computers, together with the estimated 200,000 microcomputers (expected to increase to several million by the end of the century) now used by the U.S. federal government present challenges which administrators and archivists are ill-equipped to meet. The information created by such computers is often ephemeral because of the short life span of the medium itself or the software and hardware needed to read it; when it is randomly stored on free-standing microcomputers, frequently only the immediate creator of such information with his or her own personal indexes can retrieve it, leaving the long-term needs of the institution for which the individual works or the researcher in the future with the impossible task of locating unindexed information. Finally, the ease with which such information is created and erased means that it may well be lost before those responsible have had an opportunity to assess its value. Responsibility for records is diffused in government, leading to a situation in which no individual or agency can be held accountable

for their creation, use, or disposal. The report concludes that solutions for the problems identified at the federal level are applicable for both state and local governments.

Reduced to their fundamental elements, the recommended solutions are not complex. The responsibility for managing records should be in the hands of individual government agencies. Such management includes reducing costs of keeping records by creating and maintaining only those which are needed for reference or accountability, by disposing of the remainder, and identifying and transferring to the National Archives those of permanent value. The agency head should be accountable for this process and should delegate it to a level sufficiently senior in the institution and with enough resources to ensure that it is accomplished. Agency historians and archivists should be numbered among these resources. The National Archives, as a key player, should provide leadership by re-examining current standards for records keeping in light of new technologies, establishing a reference division to gather information about the holdings of government agencies, providing information from its own records to government agencies, and giving guidance on records matters to state and local governments analogous to that provided by the Library of Congress for printed materials. Finally, an Executive Order should be passed which would integrate by means of a Records Management Policy Council the responsibilities of the National Archives, the Office of Management and Budget, and the General Services Administration in the area of records management and which would assign responsibility for administering records programmes to individual agencies. Most of the observations made in this report are germane to the Canadian scene. Canadian archivists working with government records are wrestling with the same problems and recognize all too well, though understandably in varying degrees according to differing jurisdictions, the deficiencies in records management and archival programmes enumerated in the report.

Let us take one recommendation of the report — the necessity to define clearly the responsibilities of the major players in records matters. Government records archivists, if asked, would point proudly to some instrument — legislation, regulation, or policy — which sets out the respective jurisdictions in matters of records and archives. Few of us could testify that each player does exactly what he or she is supposed to do, or that in practice there is no overlapping of functions and sometimes even jealousy and interference among the participants. How many of these instruments, for example, deal adequately with the realities of the new technologies or of changing government information policies? Is there a mechanism in place through which archival institutions can influence this change or respond with the other players to the new technology?

The proposal to raise the profile of the National Archives in a number of innovative ways certainly strikes a responsive chord with most archivists. What of the recommendation that the prime responsibility for creating, maintaining, and disposing of records, including the identification of those of permanent value, be vested with each government agency? Most archivists would not quarrel with government agencies exercising any of the usual records management tasks save, perhaps, that of identifying records of permanent value. Government archivists employed by central archival institutions have tended to guard this prerogative jealously, or to share it rather grudgingly with the institutions whose records they appraise and acquire. Archivists have argued that their “independence” and unique ability to review all programmes of government make it possible for them to be objective in appraisal matters. This argument has validity.

However, archivists have not "sold" archival programmes to senior managers in government; we have not been able to show how archives can benefit them. Archives are often, for these senior managers, alien creatures. We ought to sell our archival programmes, to make them appear relevant to these agencies, and if this means sharing some of our sacred prerogatives, we should consider doing so. Experience has shown that government agencies respond at best in a lukewarm manner to legislative, regulatory, or policy requirements in matters concerning records and archives unless they can be shown to be of direct benefit to them. As an example, at the federal level in Canada some reluctant attention has been paid to records matters by federal government agencies in response to passage of the *Access to Information Act* and the *Privacy Act*. Just enough to get by, the jaded observer would say. On the other hand, one former cabinet minister, who had the misfortune to be head of an agency with possibly the poorest records programme in the federal government, was forced in the not too distant past to retract statements made in the House of Commons. The errors in his earlier statements were directly attributable to an inability to establish certain facts that could not be found in the records of his department. At least partly as a consequence, that department is embarking upon one of the most ambitious and progressive records management programmes in the federal government. Self-interest is a great catalyst. The point is made in this report that if an agency's records adequately document the development of its policies and the operations of its programmes, the best of these records will also serve any future research requirement. This is, of course, self-evident. But the corollary of this is that it is the agency itself which must be responsible for creating, maintaining, and disposing of these records. The support for good records programmes must come from senior officials within agencies. This support will only be forthcoming if the programme's benefits are apparent. Perhaps central archival repositories ought to do a better job in pointing out these benefits to officials in government who are in a position to give records and archival programmes the necessary support.

The main arguments in this book are contained in only fifty-two pages. Three appendices follow. The first is an overview of U.S. government records programmes written for the novice. It contains a short history and analysis of the impact of existing legislation, technology, and emerging government information policy on records programmes. The second and longer appendix deals with preservation and is essentially a discussion of the technical problems involved in the long-term preservation of government records in their various forms. Both of these appendices are in themselves short reports on these subjects, either commissioned by the committee or excerpted from other sources. The third appendix contains reference material. The whole volume is structured for those who want to read quickly or to skim the highlights. Chapters contain numerous sub-headings, each with a discrete topic; there is an executive summary of just three pages; finally, the argument of the main report is short and to the point. One suspects that the volume is so structured because it is meant to be read by those for whom time is a scarce commodity. The brevity of the report does not detract from its usefulness, as the thesis is clearly written, well constructed, and conclusively argued.

The committee takes pains to point out that the private nature of its sponsorship and funding means that it is not speaking for, but to, government. The committee's work ought to be more influential because of this fact. The report is important for archivists because the issues it raises must be addressed by the profession. Failure to do so, according to the

committee, will mean that there will be few quality archival records to consult for the next generation of researchers. This little volume, I repeat, is worth the read.

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**A Manual of Archival Techniques.** ROLAND M. BAUMANN, ed. Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1982. ix, 133 p. ISBN 0 89271 020 9 \$5.75 pa.

It should come as no surprise to learn that the majority of those working in archives are not archivists at all. Many of the records of the nation are being tended by librarians, museum curators, and staff and volunteers of local historical societies. It is (or at least should be) a bit of a surprise to find how seldom the question of training of these archival practitioners is raised. Archival training has received more than its share of discussion at ACA conferences, in *Archivaria* articles, and in funding proposals, but it has been almost without exception "higher education." In most parts of the country there have been some workshops and lectures but often the professional response to requests for basic education has been a disdainful "archivist, train thyself."

This can be daunting, even for the most dedicated, for until recently there have been few materials available. Kenneth W. Duckett's *Modern Manuscripts* (1975) has become the standard text. The Society of American Archivists' series of manuals, now running to thirteen volumes, has been popular and effective, but the cost of the entire series is now in excess of one hundred Canadian dollars. One should remember that many small institutions would find this cost a major expenditure.

*A Manual of Archival Techniques* is an inexpensive primer which grew out of a series of Pennsylvania workshops in which some 225 individuals participated. The workshops were aimed at institutions with non-professional staff and limited resources and the speakers were asked to discuss basic techniques and inexpensive solutions.

With the exception of a fifteen-page section on "Where to go for help," which features state and federal U.S. agencies, the entire volume will be useful to small Canadian institutions. Unlike Duckett's volume, which makes a strong distinction between archives and manuscripts and addresses the latter, the *Manual* acknowledges that many smaller institutions end up with records of municipal governments and agencies and so attention is paid to the problems of large volume and low interest which such records often generate.

In addition to the "Where to go for help" section, the *Manual* has four sections. Within each there are essays authored by experts from institutions ranging from the National Archives and Records Administration to the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. The authors have by and large successfully managed to scale down their not inconsiderable knowledge and apply their skills to the problems of smaller institutions. The tone of the volume is set by an overview article by Peter J. Parker in which he posits the existence of a Yahoo County Historical Society which has decided to create an archive. Parker successfully creates an attitudinal framework for the sections on methodology, planning, and conservation which follow.