

Book Reviews

American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States. RICHARD J. COX. Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1990. xv, 347 p. ISBN 0-8108-2338-1 \$37.50.

Almost no one thinks about archives, archivists and the challenges facing them the way Richard Cox does. Cox, an archival educator at the University of Pittsburgh, elaborates his singular vision, the product of a career spent in a variety of archival institutions, in this handsome volume. The chapters, most of them already published separately, analyse a wide range of topics. Despite their individual composition, they present a coherent whole with a compelling viewpoint on the current status and future prospects of archivists.

Professionalism is the theme that runs through the book. Up to now, archivists' sense of professionalism has been sadly underdeveloped. Weak or nonexistent standards, the lack of a well-defined knowledge base and educational structure, and the absence of serious research into what we do and why have all handicapped us. Add to these a poor public understanding of the archival mission and inadequate funding for archives' programmes, and you have a delineation of the problem. Rather than simply wring his hands in a woe-is-us cry of self-pity, however, Cox argues that hard analysis and a change of attitude by archivists themselves are the only remedies. Early in the book, he sums up the kind of vision we need with a metaphor that stayed with me: most archivists have been too much like Ptolemy, he says, trying to figure out the universe by standing on the roof of their own repository and thinking that everything revolves around them. A broader perspective is essential.

Cox's placement of the profession in its historical context provides a basis for understanding its present discontents. Ironically, archivists (who see themselves as part of the historical enterprise) have little sense of their own history, but Cox suggests many avenues for future study. In a fascinating chapter, for instance, he describes twentieth-century American archival history by examining what archivists are writing about themselves and their work. This fresh approach is evident in other ways too. His chapter on the concept of professionalism as applied to archivists, based on a mastery of the sociological literature about professions, remains the best thing written on that subject to date. His discussion of the work that archivists and preservation specialists need to do in selecting materials for preservation, moving away from the notion of comprehensive collecting, is the most sensible thing I have read in that area in a long time.

Cox is arguing that we have much to learn from other professions, the librarian profession in particular. Few would disagree, but too few have taken the message to heart, and the results may not be uniformly positive. This reviewer found Cox not entirely convincing on the connections between archives and public history. The latter remains a poorly defined (I was tempted to say “ersatz”) profession, created largely because academic historians found their markets drying up. It had little broad support, and Cox is more sanguine about its ultimate survival than I would be. With our other professional cousins, however, he offers telling insights. Many government and institutional archivists, for example, dismiss rare book librarians as quaint antiquarians. Cox shows how the skills in analytical bibliography cultivated in those collections are appropriate to an expanded view of the archivist’s task.

Improved professionalism relies on a defined body of knowledge and on a systematic means of conveying that knowledge to successive professional generations. Cox’s view of this is clear, unabashed, and (I may as well say it) correct. In the great debate over whether there is such a thing as archival theory, he minces no words: of course there is. Virtually everything remains to be done to articulate that theory, but only the larger outlook it provides will offer archivists any hope of survival. More substantial archival education, too frequently ad hoc in the United States — and in Canada as well, until recently — must likewise develop. Here as elsewhere, Cox’s great skill (and his great contribution) is to propose a “research agenda”: what do we *not* know now that we must know if we are to meet the challenges of archives in the future — or, for that matter, in the present? Scoffers who respond “shut up, and just let me process my collection” will probably think this kind of intellectual exercise a waste of time. The sensible among them will reconsider after coming to terms with the sheer scope of Cox’s suggestions; the remainder will join Ptolemy among history’s discards.

In sum, this is a tremendously important book that deserves wide reading, wide reflection, and wide emulation. The ideas presented are as appropriate today as when the essays were first written: only one chapter, that on the report of the Society of American Archivists’ Goals and Priorities Task Force, seemed dated to me. Throughout, the work is based on impressive research and serious thought. In fact, the amount of secondary literature that Cox has read, understood, and woven together is almost frightening in its sweep. If we have indeed entered the “Age of Archival Analysis” (the coinage belongs not to Cox but to a colleague), this book is its opening manifesto. The archival profession will thank its author not merely by praising him, but by responding to the challenges he offers.

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Management of Recorded Information: Converging Disciplines . CYNTHIA DURANCE, comp. Proceedings of the International Council of Archives’ Symposium on Current Records, National Archives of Canada, May 15-17, 1989. Munich: K.G. Saur, 1990. 218 p. ISBN 3-598-10897-4.

Two years ago the National Archives of Canada, in cooperation with the Current Records Committee of the International Council of Archives, invited sixteen experts to address issues involved in recording, finding, and using information. More than three