

# *The Acts of the Appraisers: The Context, the Plan and the Record*

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I am grateful to Hans Booms for reminding us of two important facts: one he does so explicitly, with characteristic logic and thoroughness; the other he accomplishes implicitly, with equally characteristic charm and persuasiveness. The first fact concerns our social condition and its effect on our professional choices and working methods. As an active participant in society rather than a passive observer of it, archivists select records with society's values firmly implanted in their minds. Put quite simply, we are part of society, not separate from it. We should, therefore, recognize the inevitable impact of the social context in which we make our selections upon those judgements. If the symbiosis between archivists and their context was ever in doubt, it must be dispelled by the experience of the archivists in the state archives of the former German Democratic Republic, as outlined by Hans Booms in his paper.<sup>1</sup> The second important fact to which Booms draws our attention is that archival theory advances through proposition, debate, reformulations, amendments and further debate. The tangled undergrowth of ignorance, unsupported speculation and facile philosophising, however, may be cleared away cleanly by a sword of argument finely tempered by an alloy of courtesy and carefully reasoned argument. Booms illustrates the truth of this method in this revision of his documentation plan, first published in 1972.<sup>2</sup> In his current paper, Booms rethinks that plan which, in its modified form, he again proposes as a valid method of appraising documents for the value they possess for society. These modifications are offered to us by Booms, after many years of reflection and discussion with archivists, and in the best spirit of scholarly inquiry. Booms' revised process for establishing the values of records created by any society, and in his case and examples, particularly those created by the state, still embodies a formal documentation plan but—and this is a most important addition—the process now includes an analysis of the context in which the documents are created as a second and equally important component of archival evaluation. Booms, in pondering our relationship to society and to its records, gives us a yardstick by which we can measure value and a schematic plan for building society's documentary record. While we must continue to debate the substance of his theory of planned documentation, we are nonetheless truly grateful to Booms for showing us the manner in which these debates are best conducted.

The majority of us would agree that appraisal is the single most important function performed by an archivist, because it has wide-reaching and everlasting social implications. Our decisions inevitably lead to the destruction of some records; these decisions are irrevocable and, consequently, the theory which underpins our actions is very important. The theory of appraisal, and the methods of undertaking appraisal in specific historic circumstances, are subjects from our own professional past which require detailed investigation and analysis. Booms provides us with an overview of appraisal theory since 1920. The usefulness of this review confirms the practical value of the investigation, and indicates that much more work needs to be done along the historical lines that Booms suggests. Certainly, since the turn of the century, the explosion in the number of documents available to archives has meant, quite practically, that hard choices have had to be made. But it would be misleading to say that archivists have universally embraced the necessity of selective retention. Many have neither easily nor quietly assumed the role of selector. Archivists as diverse in background, experience, temperament and training as Sir Hilary Jenkinson and Elio Lodolini, while accepting the reality that only a small portion of records may be kept, have been reluctant, at the same time, to claim inherent virtue in the necessity to select.

Leaving aside the philosophical problems that arise when we tamper with the documentary record left by the past, we are still faced with some very practical problems seemingly unrelated to theory. By assuming the function of the appraiser of records, archivists and their acts of appraisal are potentially controversial. Appraisal is a social action that archivists characteristically perform as part of their professional duties. However, archivists assume this responsibility without general agreement in society that appraisal is their proper function. Appraisal is a social action with broad consequences, but one which rests on a narrow platform of validation. The wide group of potential users of archives can be wary and often highly critical of the most carefully taken and conservative of archival appraisal decisions. We have only to recollect the shrill outcries in Ontario in 1986 and 1987 over the perfectly reasoned decision of the Archives of Ontario to select certain classes of land records for preservation. Should society, nevertheless, take archivists on faith? Can the profession demonstrate that our actions are based on, say, a well-developed tradition in the profession? Or if tradition is not deemed a sufficient basis to validate decisions, can we then demonstrate a fully-developed science of appraisal to comfort us and our users? Having raised these questions, I shall not attempt to answer them directly; rather, in response to Booms, I should like to direct attention to related issues, both of a practical and of a theoretical nature. A consideration of these issues will help to place the exercise of appraisal theory in a broad context.

The first point I should like to make concerns the manner in which we often conduct the discussion of appraisal. I feel as though I live perpetually in a grey world of the present, not so black as the past, where wrong appraisal decisions litter every archives with its secret burden of embarrassing acquisitions, but not as yet fully introduced into that shining white future, where all problems of acquisition will be solved by the application of the right theory of appraisal. By discussing appraisal and particularly the history of appraisal in a moral discourse, the right decisions taken in the past become accidents, while the wrong are the result of a faulty theory. By looking for What is Right and What is Wrong, we create an artificial dichotomy that is not only useless in a practical sense, but misleading because it blurs the nuances which give reality its unique form and substance. [For a profession which deals with the past, we run particular risks in

relegating the experience of our own past by throwing its work into question rather than understanding it in context.] Is the right theory or model really as elusive as our constant striving to develop it seems to suggest? Or is the process of appraisal itself, constantly re-enacted over time, the real truth? Viewed in this context, changes in our records should naturally lead us to introduce changes in our methods. Would we not be better served and satisfied if we separated theory from method?

Booms argues, persuasively, that social norms inevitably affect archivists and also, by implication, their work. His example of the GDR documentation profiles is dramatic proof of these effects. Booms suggests that the solution is our documentation plan: through it we at least systematize the appraisal process by a conscious attempt to replace our own values with those of the creators of the records.

This leads me to the second issue I should like to raise. I suggest not only that we should examine the effects of social norms on our decisions, but also that we must recognize that our entire enterprise of appraisal is embedded in a deep conviction of the power of rationality. We believe, implicitly, that our acts of appraisal can be based on a rational science of valuation. We would be appalled by the suggestion that we should rely on the power of fate to decide the shape of our archives: we have no faith in the purpose of any power beyond that determined by rational means. We would also be very sceptical and probably dismissive of the suggestion that artistry and intuition are important ingredients in any appraisal. Our job is not conceived as a creative act. We do not create the past like an artist creates a work of art; rather, we aim to control the past, or more accurately, to control the documentation of the past, like a systems methodizer, balancing aims, objectives, resources and demand. We might want to ask, nevertheless, how the past is related to the method of its creation. To phrase this question practically: can great art be created by committees? Stated in reverse, can an artist and artistic norms manage large data banks? Is the past and the shape of its documentation in our archives a work of art or a collection of information possibilities? We generally ignore the complex philosophical questions that lurk behind commonsense notions of reality. By so doing, however, we expose our decisions to attack, either from those motivated by ideology or from critics employing the techniques of post-modern deconstruction.

This leads me the third issue which I think we need to consider, that of our ethical position in relation to the past and to its records—what I prefer to regard as the contrast between two attitudes, one of respect and one of control. Are we to respect the past and the records that it produced, or are we the controllers of the past, shaping it for the future through planned selections of documents? Is there an irreconcilable tension between controlling the past and preserving its records? Is our search for a theory of valuation that can guide appraisal driven by the imperative of an overwhelming volume of documents, or by a clandestine desire to interfere with the past by shaping its records? Let us suppose that an archival theory of value is possible, and that, indeed, it is our rightful role in society to determine this value and to ensure that the records of the past are preserved according to its norms. At the 1986 ACA Annual Conference in Winnipeg, Danielle Laberge provocatively asked us to reverse the questions we pose in our acts of appraisal. We should not be asking what is valuable enough to keep, but rather we should be asking what will be lost if we destroy?<sup>3</sup> By posing the appraisal question this way, we recognize that it is a higher duty to justify destruction rather than retention. This simple reversal returns us to a more sympathetic orientation to records, where respect replaces control as the basis for decisions.

The fourth point I should like to make concerns the practical steps which surround appraisal. Regardless of the model of appraisal that is employed by an archivist, the actual process of valuation has implication for our everyday work. How to implement either a plan or a model is a very practical, managerial, administrative issue. All appraisal models, even the most mechanical, imply that the archivist has adequate research time, thinking time, consultation time and sampling/study time. I suspect that, more often than not, such leisure is not available. We must recognize that the practical steps involved in developing working drafts are just as important as the visionary plan: one cannot work without the other. How are our appraisal models and our documentation plans to be practically implemented? This question is particularly pressing in holistic models of documentation, which cross over traditional archive boundaries. For cooperative plans to work, the links among institutions have to be strong and flexible. Such links are not presently in place.

Associated with the need for us to work on the practical implications of applying theories of value to the selection process is a complementary and equally important need for us to share our experiences in appraisal. I recently attended two conferences that focused on the broad issues involved in selecting case files, one in Europe and one in the United States.<sup>4</sup> It was clear from the discussions at both these meetings that many archivists are doing pioneer work. Unfortunately, their experience remains isolated because there are no effective links among us or ways of sharing practical experience. Why is this so? We have excellent archival journals and regular professional conferences: both would seem to be ideal places for practical experience to be reported upon and analysed. It is important to recognize that the small body of literature we have, compared to the vast amount of practice available to draw upon, stems not from editorial rigidity, but from our collective failure to share freely our experience. Quite frankly, we are reluctant to bring the skeletons out of the closet. We are afraid to share our experiences because of possible embarrassment to ourselves and our institutions. We are apprehensive of criticism from our colleagues and particularly from our academic users—that very group whom Booms says he has despaired of their ever coming to a consensus about archival issues. Regardless of the documentation plans or methods we have employed, only by sharing experience can we publicize and then resolve the practical problems that face us. We need to do this soon, and in the spirit of co-operation rather than competition. I am not suggesting that we raise to the level of theory some of the unspoken and unspeakable rituals of appraisal—my personal favourite is “Is the widow dead yet?”—nor do I think that it would be useful to mould our discussion as an *apologia* for the original sin of not being able to preserve all records. What we need to do is build a compendium of practice which illustrates and extends our theories by establishing the network of connections that link theory with method.

My fifth point is an observation rather than a question. The documentation plan suggested by Booms would be most effective if three conditions were satisfied. First, there should be general agreement on the plan and its purposes—whether that lies within a single institution or among many repositories. Secondly, there should be a commitment to the plan and to its implementation over the long term. Finally, and perhaps most critically, there should be a separation between the time when the records were created and used, and the time when they are appraised for selective retention. This last condition allows for a generous period of reflection, which provides the archivist with the clearest perspective on the past and ensures the greatest accuracy of both the historical and the

administrative chronicles. A quiet period for reflection is patently not available to archivists who deal with modern records. The acceleration of the life cycle in today's office alters the conditions under which Booms's plan would work best. By waiting for the natural process of temporal distillation, the archivist is faced with a flawed record because the passage of time has aided the process of random destruction. By taking quick action, he/she is thrust into making decisions at a time contemporary with that of the records. Faced with these two opposing alternatives, our choice is clear. Most of us would agree that the archivist should be involved earlier in the life cycle, and that decisions need to be made almost at the time when the records are created—precisely to prevent thoughtless destruction. However, the practical implication of our legitimate concern to prevent the destruction of valuable records is that we inevitably work in the contemporary arena, where the act of appraisal takes place without the benefit of a timely period of reflection. This hard reality must be taken into consideration as we develop models and methods.

In conclusion, I should like to draw attention to an integral part of Booms's plan, which he does not explicitly deal with, but one to which he does allude. Booms points to the critical connection between theoretical models and the actual record base and provenance of the records in question. The addition of 'hot-links' between the subjective plan—that is, what to document—and the contextual location of the pertinent records—that is, the provenance of the documents—is an important extension of Booms's original plan of 1972. I, nevertheless, think the plan would be made even stronger by the explicit addition of one other component, alluded to but rarely discussed directly, despite being a critical component of the archival enterprise. It seems to me that we need not just documentation plans, or plans with the addition of administrative context, but plans and contextual analysis anchored in the firm knowledge of documents, of records and of their forms.

Many of you will have heard about the "Rudkin Principle"—named after the archivist who first identified the phenomenon—and know of the effects of what I like to call the "archive syndrome." The principle, plainly stated, is that all young turks inevitably become the old turkeys! I myself admit that I often feel somewhat "out of sync" with the present. Am I in transition from young rebel to old bird? Perhaps, more politely, I have been called old-fashioned because I talk about such unfashionable subjects as documents, the forms of documents and of records, and of the technology for making records and of preserving them. Careful study of documents and attention to their intellectual and social histories, however, is neither an old-fashioned interest, nor one divorced from the unforgiving realities of appraisal. The reality of the record base must be an indispensable component of all acts of appraisal. Without an understanding of documents and records, of their forms and of their functions, and of how they were created and used, a plan can be so easily upset by the attractiveness of concentrating on information divorced from the realities of its documentary expression. At one extreme we loose contact with the meaning of records, while at the other we are led to create records to fill the voids in our plan. After all is said and done, it is the record which is our special area of knowledge; it will be a sad day and a dangerous step when faith in planning replaces the study and knowledge of records.

### Notes

- \* Commentary on Hans Booms, "Überlieferungsbildung: Archives-Keeping as a Social and Political Activity." An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Banff, 23 May 1991.
- 1 "Überlieferungsbildung: Keeping Archives as a Social and Political Activity," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 25-33.
  - 2 Hans Booms [Hermina Joldersma and Richard Klumpenhower, editors and translators], "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), pp. 69-107.
  - 3 Danielle Laberge, "Information, Knowledge, and Rights: the Preservation of Archives as a Political and Social Issue," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88), p. 45.
  - 4 "Documenting Twentieth Century Medicine": A Working Conference held at the National Library of Medicine, June 1988. See a report of this conference in *Watermark* 12 (Summer 1989), pp. 29-31. "Health Care Records: Selection, Preservation and Use": A one-day conference sponsored by the Society for the Social History of Medicine, Institute of Historical Research, London, England, 13 April 1991. See a report of the conference, in *Society for the Social History of Medicine Gazette* no. 2 (August 1990), pp. 6-8.