

How Goes it with Appraisal?

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Something of a crisis brews over archival appraisal. The more archival documents are created, the more difficult the decisions become. The more difficult decisions become, the more we archivists write about appraisal. The more we write, the more we fret about the question. The more we fret, the more we are tempted to think that there are no solidly-grounded answers to the question of what to keep—that anything goes. My premise is that valid answers are possible. Close examination of the thinking behind the evaluative decisions that archivists make can penetrate some of the basic difficulties and set the stage for rationalizing the process.

When documents made and received in the course of the conduct of affairs are evaluated at anytime by anyone, the evaluator in effect makes a statement that may be put in one of two ways. Either the evaluator says, these documents are of no use for these specified purposes, and therefore may be disposed of in this manner; or, these documents are of use for these specified purposes, and therefore may be disposed of in this manner. I do not say that the matter of evaluation or appraisal is always seen or expressed in this way, but it invariably comes to that. Either way, we face the same puzzle. How can we possibly distinguish valid appraisal statements from invalid ones? If one thinks that no such distinction can be made, then one entertains the notion that anything goes, that the process is inescapably subjective and relativistic.

We may note at the outset that our statement is concerned with what is called the dispositions of things. Dispositions are capacities of a thing that may be distinguished from the observable properties it exhibits and the actual processes it undergoes. That a thing is flammable cannot be deduced from observation of its properties or from knowing how it was created and of what it is made. One must either test the matter or rely on one's experience of an object's flammability. As the philosopher Nelson Goodman puts it, "a thing is full of threats and promises."¹ Archivists might well regard appraisal as a matter of reckoning the balance of threats and promises of archival documents, of puzzling out what the likely costs of not having them might be, and what benefit might come from continuing to have them. In a nice coincidence of usage, *disposition* in the sense of determining the final resting place of archives is first a matter of reckoning their *dispositions* in the sense of their capacities.

Complex as the statements archivists make in appraisal might be, if we were to try to penetrate the thinking behind them, they do fall into a category called projections, which we make every day in many ways to make things in our environment predictable, to go from known to unknown, or from past to future cases. The essential problem in appraisal is to learn how archi-

vists can move from what we can know to some valid projection of what we apparently cannot know, that is, from what we can know about the documents to suppositions about their continuing value.

Understanding the properties of archives and the processes forming them is important in the exercise of appraisal. While no archivist will fail to comprehend those properties and processes, understanding them cannot of itself solve the puzzle of evaluation. Three examples will illustrate why. The cost of keeping any archival document depends on its physical characteristics or properties; knowing those properties, however, does not tell us whether to keep it. Every document bears some relationship to others in the *fond d'archives* to which it belongs; knowing that, however, does not alone tell us whether to keep any particular document or documents. Archives result from a functional process; however, knowing the features of that process does not tell us what to keep. Knowledge of that kind is relevant, even vital, to the exercise but not determinative of its outcome.

We now have a basic philosophical framework in mind such that we are set to explore the capacities of archives, the nature of the act of projecting continuing value, and the part that knowledge of the properties and processes of any given archives plays in the act of appraisal.

The greatest capacity of archival documents is inherent in them all. Every archival document has the capacity to act as a source of knowledge about the past, but a very particular, precious, and unique source. Archival documents are the only evidential window we have on the action-oriented past, because they arise in the course of our acting in relation to one another and to events in the world. Archival documents do capture a moment in time, fix and freeze it, as it were, in order to preserve some sense of it for future reference, some sense of the unique character of the actions and events from which the documents arose. No material artifact of human life, no work of literature or science, bespeaks action in the way archival documents do. Indeed, one often cannot fully understand the historical dimension of artifacts and works of the mind without reference to archives, which may be used to help us understand how and why such things came to be or were employed. Archival documents are a means by which we carry forward the experience and results of action in the past, and through which we try to overcome the constraints of present conditions and the limitations of personal experience.

Archival documents thus are evidence first and information second. People often pass over the question of evidence rather too quickly in order to get to information. Archives frequently suffer from being transformed into mere sources of information, when they are in fact much more than that. In part, that explains why they are so difficult to evaluate. Sitting in judgement on the life and death of unique evidence that has been used to order affairs and may again be needed to order them, or to portray how they were ordered in a quest for knowledge of the past, is indeed a serious matter and a weighty responsibility fully deserving of the attention that it has recently begun to receive even beyond the confines of the historical and archival communities.

The actions to which archives are attached occur in time and place and therefore have a context which, difficult as it might be to conjure, is part of the meaning which persons come to assign to archival documents, and without which they cannot appreciate any document's importance, significance, or value—in short, why and how it may continue to be used. The difficulty of archival appraisal is that it takes great pains merely to understand the properties and processes bound up in any given body of documents and constituting its context, let alone to launch on the exacting exercise of projecting or forecasting continuing value.

Moreover, in the modern world our means of recording and communicating documents has facilitated a tremendous increase in the number of transactions that people are capable of making, and therefore the number of documents associated with them. The other day I asked a bank clerk to change a twenty-dollar bill into four fives. He went to a machine and punched some buttons; out came four five-dollar bills. He handed them to me with a record of the transaction,

placed another record with the twenty in a plastic bag, and deposited the bag in a slot in the machine. To my amazement, one simple and—I thought—inconsequential transaction generated two documents. In such ways do people become inundated, even overwhelmed, with the objects of archivists' attention. They must somehow decide which transactions will leave documentary traces and will be capable of being recalled to mind, and for how long.

The theme of the 1991 ACA Annual Conference spoke of "building a selective memory." That is a form of memory which is at issue in appraisal. If we recall action and transaction through the documents, then the processes of institutionalized acquisition and selection constitute the means by which enduring public memory of past actions is formed; by which people come to have a fund of memory-inducing objects about their collective past, analogous to the way in which personal memory over time filters and acts upon one's own past in order to select what will be remembered. We remember in order to survive, because all present actions are shot through with the process of making sense of past experience—which is the only guide we have to future action for controlling events and making things in our environment somewhat predictable.

The past, then, is not so much prologue as it is a constant constituent of thinking in the present—unavoidably so for individuals and for persons who constitute themselves in social groupings large and small, from a family to a society as a whole, each needing the means to facilitate memory. Archives are means of memory, not memory itself, because there is no communal memory without someone acting upon archives for some purpose. Public memory is by nature pluralistic: it extends outwards from the archives as public dialogue about the past shapes itself, and that dialogue is capable of reforming itself from the same source time and time again. The document is a finite and perishable resource; the dialogue, protean and endlessly renewable.

If archivists see society as being made up of a profusion of institutional arrangements for the organization of action, then we appraise for our society, but only through appraisal for each of its interrelated, institutionalized components in order that they may have memory to facilitate survival and continuous social life. The record of action conceived of as memory may then best be seen as having the greatest value in close connection with the pursuits to which it is attached—with the record's original circumstances being kept in mind as it continues to facilitate the creation of memory and meaning in the life of people. Severe centralization of historical archives to some remote facility, in order to serve supposed societal aims in the name of institutionalized total archives, limits people's capability for remembering and capitalizing on experience. That the state alone in centralized ways can form meaningful memory for all the people is fraudulent, and not simply because it is also impractical.

A competitive, forward looking society, however, very often disregards the past as it is borne forward by the memory-making potentiality of archives. Such disregard is harmful of the very aims of a progressive society to propel itself sensibly into the future. Not to care about archives is not to care about basing thought and action on evidence and knowledge, to be careless of precise memory of events, and to limit one's ability to access a wider sphere of experience than one alone possesses. Because such disregard has virtually become an accompaniment of archives in the modern age of seemingly boundless numbers of documents, we have contrived centralized, concentrated preservation of archival memory-inducing objects in archival institutions, libraries, and museums. Curiously, as the speed of creation and transmission increase, centralization appears to become less and less viable. Nevertheless, in the eyes of most people, mainly because they have become accustomed to centralized institutionalization of preservation—as also in the eyes of a good many archivists—archives obtain the status of collectible along with other "historic" or "historical" collectibles: things to be brought together in order to form a representation or articulated evocation of the past as it is conceived in the present.

But whose past is it? We archivists are quick to represent ourselves as agents of society, acting to articulate the sources of its past. In fact, the preservation of memory-inducing objects cannot be done in any given case directly for society, but rather only in a circumscribed, institutionalized setting and with particular interests in mind. We have rather been betrayed by the organic notion of society into thinking of an archives as a living thing somehow possessing a life of its own, independent of the thoughts that people have about it and that imbue it with meaning and value; and that we can capture some concentrated representation of the past behaviour of the social organism through centralized preservation of some concentrated residuum of every social exercise.

Such an engineered view of the process does not accord with the way people think about and act in relation to archival documents. To see the point a parallel may be drawn between the concept of appraisal of archives and the concept of justice. A just society can be no more than the sum of ascriptions of justness which people calculate from the realization of their interests in relation to those of others. People likewise ascribe value to the public memory-making which is the ultimate objective of long-term preservation only when documents can be seen to have meaning in connection with some personally- or institutionally-determined objective: some interest they have or assert on behalf of others in some matter.

The leap from consideration of the properties, processes, and projection of usefulness in any given case of appraisal of archives, to assertions of societal value, is far too great to make except as a matter of ideology. Because in a pluralistic world no single ideology can be trusted to serve everyone, archivists who claim to appraise on behalf of society cannot escape being ideological, which is to say, biased in favour of particular prefixed ideas of what is valuable to society as a whole. Much appraisal the world over has no doubt been of this ideological kind. One can argue that it must be so, on the grounds that the very act of public memory-making is necessarily an expression of the ideology of the society in question. We have here a circular argument. It tells us little to assert that the outcome of appraisal is necessarily ideological because archives express the worlds of thought from which they arise. To be sure, the social system determines the documents themselves and everything that happens to them. The question, however, is not how to articulate expression of the social system but rather to determine which actions the society will continue to need to recall and which documents best recall them.

All material artifacts of human creation express something of the circumstances in which they were created and used, if only we can penetrate what it is. That is what Sir Hilary Jenkinson meant when he said that archives *can* tell us the truth. Nowadays truth has become meaning. Meaning is ascribed by individuals, and therefore we tend to see meaning or truth as relative to the presuppositions of the meaning-maker. It is easy enough to be trapped by the relativism of meaning-making into thinking that archival documents can therefore bear no truth, that they are ultimately reducible to the meaning which the interpreter gives them, and that this idea somehow rules appraisal. This idea is all the more seductive when we see that what we call value is in fact capacity, which is neither inherent like properties and processes nor completely relative like meaning. Value exists, as Goodman says, as threat or promise, to be construed in any given case of appraisal as concretely or objectively as it is possible for the appraiser to make it.

Having got as far as addressing the question of value, I might refashion my original statement of the problem to be, these documents are or are not of use for these specified purposes, therefore, they are or are not valuable.

Archivists' consideration of value has been descriptive and classificatory. We have primary value, or the capacity of the documents to serve the needs of the body that created them; and secondary value, or the capacity of the documents to serve the needs of other than the creating body. We have evidential value, something of a slippery concept, which in its Schellenbergian construction means the capacity of the documents to provide information about the organiza-

tion and functions of the body creating them. Evidential value is different from probative value, or the generalized capacity which all archival documents have as record of what occurred and how it occurred in the context in which it occurred—that is, as evidence of action that can serve as memory of that action for any purpose.² By contrast, informational value simply means the capacity of the archival document to provide information about the persons, places, and subjects of which it speaks, presumably with or without reference to the immediate administrative context of the document's creation. The extent to which anyone interested in informational value may have to take probative considerations into account depends entirely on the purpose in mind. Just because archivists strive to preserve the value of archives as evidence of actions taken in context does not mean that all uses must strictly observe that context. Finally, in this general realm, there is so-called intrinsic value, which refers to the value people ascribe to the artifact or documentary object as object—for instance, as symbol or icon—and is therefore anything but intrinsic. Of course, these values are neither mutually exclusive nor always easily separable in the case of any given document. The document is an enduring entity, its faces to the world as many as the uses conceived for it.

There is an array of other categories of value, which also tend, on close examination, to be less sharply defined than they might, and which are sometimes even downright misleading or vague. Administrative value is the value for continuing conduct of affairs, and might easily be applied conceptually to the documents arising from the conduct of personal business. Archivists tend to think that administrative value atrophies to nothing, as the passage of time erodes the consequence of the actions from which the documents arose. This thinking is the same as saying that the original circumstances and consequences of action do not matter at all, do not have to be taken into account in the appraisal process. Understandable as that tendency might be, it is a dangerous perception on which to base appraisal, for it disconnects record from context and undermines the inherent value of the document to serve as evidence of action. It might only be noted in passing that legal and fiscal value are in fact two sub-classes of administrative value, of which there might well be many others in a thoroughgoing taxonomy, particularly if we recognize—as I believe we should—that these values may apply to all stages in the life of records.

The stages or phases that we have determined in our method of managing records often conceal from us the fact that documents are more or less in a continuous state of assessment from the moment they are created. The essence of the archival method is to bring the various actions of assessment into some plan to form documentary memory. The determination of what will enter the class of permanent or enduring record is but the cap on the process—its final outcome—but one which in the modern world cannot be delayed until some convenient or prescribed moment in the future when all records will be appraised. As we all know, the world does not order itself to suit archivists, and should not, for it ought to be quite the other way around. Archivists seek deliberate ways of treating archives in consonance with the order of things such as they can discover it. The limited view of archives as sources for scholarly historical study is not in consonance with the order of things. People tell us that almost every day if only we would listen. To them the terms “historical value,” “research value,” and “archival value” mean practically nothing, because in fact all three just add an adjective to the word “value” without in any way illuminating it. They are everyday shorthand that archivists or historians use when making unsupported, and sometimes unsupportable, assertions of value.

Archivists' classification of values is not much help, I fear, and even seems to cloud the issue. What archivists have in fact done is categorize, sometimes confusedly, the capacities of archives, but that does not answer the important question in appraisal. Putting such labels on value leads to tautology, to statements bound up in themselves but explaining nothing. The hard question to answer is how do we know that any one of these values will endure in any

given case, not just that it is potentially there. Historians are good at instructing archivists on the potential value of archives. That is why they cannot help counselling us to preserve almost everything, or doubting whether we have quite the right view of the matter.

In order to put our view of the matter—and theirs—aright, archivists must step back a pace or two. We cannot even begin to understand the dimensions of value without considering the grounds for evaluation. On this score, there are three generally recognized possibilities. Here too there seems to be a good deal of confusion, largely because the three are regarded as mutually exclusive, one or another having to rule in any particular case.

The first comes from our cardinal concept, provenance. As it is often applied in appraisal, the concept of provenance leads to evaluation on the basis of a judgement of the importance or significance of the creator. This often turns out to be a complement of the “big battalion” idea of history, a search for the great actors in life’s drama who take the important actions that posterity ought to ponder. Even if we were to turn the criterion on its head, which some people have tried to do, to seek documents of provenance associated with the relatively powerless in the world, we are still somewhat wrong-headed in this approach, as Hans Booms demonstrated.³ Using provenance as the principal or sole grounds of appraisal merely shifts the question one remove, where it becomes: important or significant provenance in relation to what?

Now, this obviously does not mean that understanding the provenance of documents that archivists appraise is unimportant; it is just that such understanding does not alone provide a basis for appraisal, even if we properly take comprehending provenance to include analysis of the character of the documents in question. Importance and significance are not inherent qualities of provenance any more than they are of archival documents. People endow certain creators and certain archival documents with importance, as they reckon threat and promise, and as they capitalize on the capacity of the documents to call forth past action that interests them—which echoes somehow in their life.

The second proposed grounds is pertinence of the documents, often rather confusingly called their “subject.” Subject in this sense of the word means the matter or matters which the documents are about, but what are archival documents “about”? Not being the product of thought, discussion, or investigation but rather of action, they do not really have subject in the sense that documents generated to communicate information, knowledge, and expression of human sentiment do. That is why so many descriptions employ the phrase “records relating to.” This common locution strives to indicate the matter at which the activity generating the records aims, but often shades into description of the substance of the records in terms of the information that they convey. When archivists speak of pertinence, we speak of the subjects to which the information to be derived from the document pertains. We speak of archival documents as sources of information.

Using pertinence as the grounds of appraisal means evaluating information. If appraisal means evaluating the information to be derived from archives, the question again is: in relation to what? The answer is, it seems, the whole world of documentary information. However, does that not leave us with the equally puzzling question of how to evaluate anything in so vast and ultimately incomprehensible a realm? Pertinence is Schellenberg’s informational value, which he admits is a realm of relative values.⁴ The viability of pertinence alone as grounds for appraisal would appear to be even shakier than that of provenance, if we remember that archives arise from documentary processes that are attached to some transactions occurring in time and place. It is not information as such which archivists must understand, but the relationship of documents to transactions and transactions to events. If pertinence is used as the grounds of appraisal, if it is all a matter of deciding what will serve as *the best source of information about the past*, then archivists might as well leave appraisal to librarians or historians. If pertinence is

the sole grounds for appraisal, nothing of the essential nature of archives remains to be accounted in appraisal. If pertinence were not so often the only grounds on which enduring value has been determined, moreover, it would be easy to dismiss it entirely.

The third possibility is use. Archives are utilitarian objects, and so might be expected to require appraisal based on utilitarian considerations: appraisal in relation to their value for survival and continuity of the society that created them. People need archives or records in order to get on with their lives, and live them fully and well as they see fit in the institutional settings that they create for themselves. Use is a different order of concept from provenance and pertinence, both of which are abstract concepts devoid, as we have seen, of any ready empirical means of evaluation. We can understand provenance and pertinence but that does not in itself answer the question of continuing value, or give us support for our projection of value. The equivalent concept under consideration here is need. Because need is abstract, like provenance and pertinence, we cannot test or measure it on its own account—that is, by an extension of abstraction. The bank presumably believes it has some need for the receipt in the bag with the twenty dollar bill, but how long will that need endure? Need is the abstract concept of which use is the concrete, measurable expression—a social fact, if you like. Putting it the other way around, we may see that the social facts of use are determinable expressions of need, and therefore of value or benefit. Knowledge of use in effect gives substance to the threat or promise, the cost or benefit. So, use expresses value, which archival documents cannot possibly express on their own account.

Uses by kind and quantity provide an empirical measure of value, which archivists cannot otherwise adequately deduce except relatively. From analysis of evidence of the expression of value indicated by use, the archivist can project continued cost or benefit for some definite interest, some “public” as it were. This concept enjoys a certain parallel with the stance of our librarian colleagues, who have long been guided by use by particular publics in their evaluative exercise. The difference is that the librarian is interested in the need and use of information, while the archivist is concerned about the need and use of evidence to account for action. The need for evidence cannot be compared with or determined in the same way as “information need,” because the latter is essentially private and individual, while the need of evidence is essentially public and collective. Moreover, information is consumed when it is turned into the knowledge of the individual, whereas evidence is used to continue the chain of action or to reveal it as extension of experience.

Use is often rejected as a factor in appraisal because the very act of projection suggests that future use is at issue, and future use is of course unpredictable. It is true that the use of any object is connected with a purpose, and that things have a habit of serving manifold and unpredictable purposes. We see that hats are used to cover heads and to pull rabbits from. We see that a will can be used to resolve settlement of an estate, or as a source of various kinds of social data, which people may use for many purposes. We observe that a certain class of document finds itself regularly in court, while another does not. We construe purpose to encompass the notion of reason for use, by a constituency of user, for specified benefit. Therefore, we make and use hats to shield us from the sun and rain, and magicians use hats from which to pull rabbits in order to entertain people. We use wills to order lawful inheritance of wealth; historians and social scientists use them to study patterns of inheritance, in order to help us understand how we distribute wealth and power; and genealogists use them to trace family history for whatever personal rewards they may be seeking out of the exercise. The records of ownership of land appear regularly in court to attest people’s rights and uphold the rule of law. Private letters between family members are rarely admitted as evidence in court; nevertheless, they excite curiosity and study from a number of perspectives.

The regularities of these social facts of use can be traced in various ways through various sources of evidence in order to construct an empirical picture of the actual, demonstrable use/value that archives have. Use by someone for some purpose, therefore, is what in the end we

take into account when we assess value and essay its projection into the future. Our knowledge of past use of the archival documents that we appraise and those of like-kind forms the experience from which we project future value. Just imagine what it would be like if we did not have the essential clue to value that comes from knowledge of use. In fact, such a circumstance is unimaginable. Use simply cannot be dismissed from the mind; it resides in our experience of archives. What archivists cannot allow is any narrow or partial construction of the link between use and value when making any particular appraisal.

Archivists may well bristle at this idea as being too utilitarian, as prohibiting us from asserting ideal values, universal values of the preservation of archives. What about cultural value, it may be asked; what about posterity? What indeed. Has not Jenkinson adjured us to avoid thinking of archives as things created for posterity? Why then evaluate them as if they were? If we wish archives to serve as an essential expression of the society in which they were created and its values, the only possible criterion to guide evaluation is experience of use of the thing, use which expresses society's valuation of it. Suppositions about the future cost or benefit of use must of course be made, but they are part of the act of projecting value from knowledge of the cost and benefit of known past decisions about disposition. In effect, archivists infer continuing cost or benefit from the experience of what they have kept and how it has been used.

Both primary and secondary use provide expression of how our contemporaries value archives. Evidence of the use of active, semi-active, and inactive records provides us with empirical grounds on which to rest our projections. To anyone who objects that people are ignorant or neglectful of the continuing useful value of archives on the one hand, or who believes that people will unreasonably promote a selfish interest in the fate of any particular body of archives on the other, we simply say that it is the archivist's task to try to persuade them otherwise, in the interests of effective memory and meaning making; to be the mediator of value determination and of the many interests which may attach to the fate of the records in question.

Professional objectivity in appraisal comes from the cogency of our method of handling evidence of use, in order to explain and justify the decisions that we make on behalf of the people whom we serve. Because archivists' collective goal is indeed to assist people to decide what will survive as the source of knowledge about the past—as enduring public memory—our knowledge-building problem is parallel to that of all other science. When we appraise, we unavoidably do attempt to construe what the meaning of past experience of the use of archives may be for the future. We all rest on the accumulated knowledge and experience of our forebears, in so far as we can capture a sense of it. Therefore, during the act of appraisal, we fashion understanding of the accumulated experience of humanity's use of archives in order to allow us to put any particular case of appraisal in a context larger than most people in the here and now will be capable of doing.

Now it might seem that I have contradicted myself. Do archivists appraise within a narrow institutional context or with some broader view in mind? The answer is that we do both. When we make any projection we of course attend to the narrow considerations of the matter at hand, but we inevitably draw upon our knowledge of anything that can reasonably relate to the question before us. I simply say that arguments between those who would restrict the matter to narrow contemporary concerns and those who would assert some sense of larger concerns will inevitably be resolved by reference to experience or evidence of current and past use. The worst of it is that there is all too rarely any such resolution. In a sense, one reason is that we archivists have too successfully argued that the matter be left to us. Busy people are only too willing to do precisely that, just as they leave many other matters to experts. However, in what I regard as an entirely healthy development, there is evidence that our fellow citizens are more and more interested in what we archivists do, as the importance of archives bear in on them—which is no doubt a consequence of a deepening sense of the complications that time brings to the resolution of our social affairs.

People who decry the dead hand of the past are just impatient with the difficulty of remembering accurately and of resolving differences that they have about the meaning of past events. The past indeed exerts a force on people's minds most tellingly in times of conflict and crisis, when it is hardest for people to be deliberate in their handling of evidence, as well as for archivists to marshal their resources in appraisal. We would no doubt like to rise above transient concerns, yet there is no escape to a time and place where such influences completely disappear. Archivists are unavoidably participants in the process of documentary memory-making. They help to make it deliberate and rational.

To argue from evidence towards making any given projection of value is solely what constitutes the archivist's objectivity. To claim to pursue objectivity does not mean to be certain. Certainty is for polemicists and ideologists. Nothing can or ever will be completely certain in the exercise of appraisal, for value hangs on projection from past and present to future use and—it must be admitted—on the knowledge and skill of the evaluator. So long as we simply assert value without substantiating our assertions with evidence, we are vulnerable to accusations that we arrogate to ourselves the right to express our own necessarily biased interests and call them society's values.

Now, I am very definitely not saying that the archivist must stand in the shoes of the user. It might be salutary to compare the situation of historians *vis-à-vis* their readers with archivists *vis-à-vis* the people who make use of archives. That everyone, every day makes reference to the past does not make every man and woman an historian. The historian follows particular methods of analysis of the evidence available for the study of some matter of interest. It is these methods and the knowledge to which they lead which alone distinguish the historian from everyday interpreters of the past. The fact that use provides the empirical basis of appraisal does not make an archivist of everyone who uses archives and who may therefore contribute some knowledge to the process of appraisal. Historiographers and their readers engage in a dialogue about historical understanding in which both rely on the knowledge and experience of life that they possess. Archivists and the people with whom they collaborate in order to conduct appraisal engage in a dialogue about the value of documents, in which both rely on the knowledge and experience that they possess of the use of records. We call on their narrow experience, and they on our wider one.

If we think about it, the value and power of archives are constantly subject to interpretive wishful thinking on the part of self-interested parties. If archivists are not careful, that pervasive tendency will overtake appraisal. Our task is not to advance a cause, but rather to assist people to extend the realm of their experience. The tendency to indulge in wishful thinking or to promote some cause is only made worse if archivists persist in a search for idealized or generalized values, because such a search inevitably introduces an intrusive element of ideology into what we wish to make an exercise based on evidence and knowledge. Making valid projections during appraisal is then a matter of resisting wishful thinking about supposed future benefit in favour of marshalling a good case—from knowledge of the properties, processes, and use of the records in question—that continued benefits of use will accrue from extended preservation. Moreover, because archival documents are utilitarian objects in the first instance, because they arise from action and reflect it, use is best seen as part of the context and meaning of the record. In each case of appraisal, therefore, the analysis will come down to assessment of the regularities of past uses—both primary and secondary—of the records in question and those of like kind and circumstance. Otherwise, appraisal will be pure guesswork or indulgent whim.

If archivists regard the essence of appraisal as involving some assessment of use, then there is no essential difference between the decision whether to acquire the archives of any particular corporate body or person, and what to select from among the archives of that body or person. Of course, it is important to comprehend the whole of the interrelated documents comprising

any given archives in order to conduct appraisal. Some of the worst cases of appraisal occur when archivists focus on a part of the whole—one medium, for example, one type, or one function or activity among many related ones.

However different the way in which archivists go about acquiring material in the two cases, we strive to achieve some variation on the method of planned disposition. The impetus behind documentation or acquisition strategies is to come up with some plan to guide archivists in acquisition and selection. Any acquisition strategy and the tactics devised to advance it work to situate us so that we can accumulate the knowledge needed to conduct appraisal rather than simply respond reflexively to the opportunities presented to us. Our conditioned reflex to grasp at the straws of opportunity in order to rescue some evidence of the past is bound to result in haphazard documentary memory—just what archivists are supposed to avoid causing.

No doubt it is very difficult to reach out into the private sphere, the realm of the governed as opposed to the governing power, and get people to leave a record of action-oriented speech other than for immediate purposes. That is a matter of working with the creators, keepers, and users of archives—rather than against them, as we so often have. Rescue here and there provides scant basis for instilling a sense of continuity. If we are to understand just how people endow archives with value through use, we must work with them as closely as we can in order to arrive at articulation of use-value, and persuade them of the means in their best interest to preserve those values so identified. Everyone deserves a say in the formation of public memory, and it is our task as archivists to see that they have it—whether directly by consultation with them, or indirectly in the way we assemble evidence of the use of archives.

The element of practice that is most grievously missing in the acquisition and selection of public memory—a kind of public good—is some accounting to the public for its formation. Perhaps as public archival institutions come under access to information law, they will live up to its spirit like other agencies of government. In the past, few records of our decisions were kept. It will become increasingly difficult to justify our actions if we cannot provide a rationale for expending society's resources in order to preserve archives. Beyond that, in not keeping records of our decisions we pass up the opportunity to learn from our own past experience of appraisal.

Archivists are actors on the contemporary stage who work for the here and now so that future generations may know of what they are made, insofar as archives allow it to be known. Even though there are many possible meanings of things, even though the participant observancy of the archivist influences the outcome, there are a finite number of critical methods with which to advance knowledge in any field. We must simply define and refine our methods of assembling and analyzing the evidence on which we base our projections. In any given case, then, we can offer the world arguments as to why *not* anything goes. That is all we as archivists can expect to do, or be expected to do by our contemporaries or by posterity.

Notes

* This edited article is little changed from its original form as the keynote address given at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists in Banff, Alberta, on 22 May 1991. These thoughts represent the expansion of some ideas first broached in my "Towards a Social Theory of Appraisal," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 71-89. In particular, I have tried to clarify what I mean by "use" and the part it plays in appraisal. It is mainly on the question of use that I have made significant emendations to the text.

1 Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, 4th ed. (Cambridge, 1983), p. 40.

2 The following passage from *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956), p. 140, gives perhaps the best expression of what Schellenberg meant by evidential value:

Records containing *information* on organization, functions, activities and methods of procedure are indispensable to the government itself and to students of government. For the student of government they are a storehouse of administrative wisdom and experience. They are needed to give

consistency and continuity to its actions. They contain precedents for policies, procedures, and the like, and can be used as a guide to public administrators in solving problems of the present that are similar to others dealt with in the past. They contain proof of each agency's faithful stewardship of the responsibilities delegated to it and the accounting that every public official owes to the people whom he serves. For students of public administration who wish to analyze the experience of an agency in dealing with organizational, procedural, and policy matters, they provide the only reliable source. [my emphasis]

It is not clear why archivists need this category of value. The sense of primary value covers all the needs and uses of the document by the administration that created it; the sense of administrative value covers the needs of the agency generating the document. The sense of secondary value covers the needs of all users not part of the administration generating the records. It is curious to couple the needs of the student of public administration, whoever that may be, with those of the creating body, unless Schellenberg means by "student of public administration," anyone interested in the value of the document as evidence—in which case the category is universal to all archives and independent of purpose, which clearly was not Schellenberg's intent. That is why, to do Schellenberg justice, we may define evidential value as the capacity of the documents to provide information about the organization and functioning of the creating body. Thus, evidential value can be distinguished from the intrinsic capacity of any given document to provide evidence of the action from which it arose, or its probative value.

- 3 Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of the Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," Hermina Joldersma and Richard Klumpenhower, trans., *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), pp. 69-107. As Professor Booms disagreed with the thrust of my argument in public discussion during the conference, I might take this opportunity to give my view of the source of our disagreement. He thinks appraisal is a question of evaluation of archival *sources*, as his title says and his argument makes clear; I think it is a question of evaluation of records as evidence of action, the sole aim being to leave adequate memory of actions which its use demonstrates continues to reverberate in people's lives. Booms thinks in terms of the sources of history; I think in terms of continued resolution of the social affairs generating the records. In his view, archives ultimately become things to be judged for their value as historical sources, and therefore in some terms with the needs and rhythms of historical scholarship in mind. In my view, archives become historical sources only accidentally. Archives are created in the first instance as a by-product of activity and then become historical sources as a by-product of their preservation for other than historical purposes. Even from this different starting point there may be considerable convergence, for archivists have a habit of agreeing by instinct where ratiocination leads them apart on this question. I am convinced that the reason why archivists tend to agree is that the same evidence of use is available to them from which to draw projections of value. The rest of this essay tries to show how assessment of use, far from being necessarily subjective and relativistic, is the key to more objective appraisal.
- 4 Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, pp. 149-50 gives the classical argument. He begins by saying that records appraised for informational values "should be appraised in relation to all other documentation ... regardless of its form, whether published or unpublished," pertaining to the sphere of the appraiser. He goes on to say that "the standards that apply to informational values are thus not absolute, but relative both as to time and place." He sees this relativity as a virtue, for "diverse judgements, in a word, may well assure a more adequate social documentation." He then says that "in appraising the informational value of records various research uses may be taken into account." Informational value, therefore, is the value for research purposes of the information contained in the records on "persons, places, subjects and the like."