

## *Looking at Archives from A Bird's Eye View: Flights of Fancy, Recreation, or Re-creation?*

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In these essays, Brien Brothman and Theresa Rowat have chosen to look at archives from the vantage point of an outsider. Brothman adopts the perspective of a postmodernist, employing the language and techniques of textual deconstructionists to explore archives. Rowat, by contrast, demonstrates a deep concern for the future of the archival institution and of the profession, especially as both operate within a society that places value on science rather than art. Each essay has its own temperament. Rowat's piece abounds in passionate feeling and colourful impression, in keeping with its purpose to challenge. The claims of her opinions will need to be dispassionately investigated, and to start us off she shows us the areas where research is needed. Brothman's essay is an exposition. It rests on a knowledge of Jacques Derrida, of his writings and his methods of textual criticism. Both of these essays purport to address the pre-suppositions that support archival work. Two areas of particular pertinence are the relationship of archives to their cultural purposes in society and the suitability of the methods used by modern archivists to implement these purposes. The intention of both authors is to pluck us out of our customary habit of mind formed by the repeated routines of archival activity and by the comfort we have with the familiar in our intellectual life.

The Scottish poet Robbie Burns was confident that people would be improved in tolerance, understanding, and even humours if they could only see themselves as others do. But does this wish hold true for archives? What is the practical value of looking at archives from the outside? And especially, what is the use of this vision if we look through someone else's glasses? Are these two excursions merely flights of fancy, recreation downtime from real archival work? After all, archivists are eminently practical people, rarely given to speculating and theorizing—because these have no particular application and no concrete use. As a group we are generally unaccustomed to philosophizing—an intellectual activity that seems to be far removed from the demands of our jobs. We are convinced empiricists in every respect. Reality for us comes in the form of the volume of records with which we have to deal, in the insufficient space and staff that we have to care for these records, in the prodigious job we have in providing value-neutral access to the veins of information buried in our records, and in the form of perversely insistent problems, such as those of copyright and appraisal. All in all, we have rather too much to do every day, and rarely have time for considering the big picture.

Some would argue that our empirical, practical bent is a virtue and not a sin because there is no big picture that we are neglecting. These archivists dismiss speculating and theorizing as useless, serving no purpose beyond providing entertainment for a small coterie who enjoy the

diversions of intellectual puzzles. After all, looking at archives from a bird's-eye view does not help us appraise and select records. What does theorizing contribute to preservation programmes and to readers' services?

I will respond to these rhetorical questions with a general commentary on Brothman's essay, "the Limits of Limits: Derridean Deconstruction and the Archival Institution," and Rowat's opinion piece, "The Record and Repository as a Cultural Form of Expression." The commentary will be brief. It will be neither the rebuttal of a sceptic nor the confirmation of a believer. Instead, I want to focus on concrete archive tasks and, within this context, to suggest the practical uses of the ideas in these papers for the every-day work of archivists. My purpose is to show the relevance to archival work of looking at ourselves through the eyes of others.

Firstly, criticism of archives theory, questions about the real value and purposes of various archival methods, and dramatic frontal attacks on our practices are sure ways to prompt a reply. If these replies are based on a careful study of the subject and if they argue points in detail and with substantiation, then not only is our knowledge enriched, but also our confidence is strengthened. In the first instance, however, the real effect of what may turn out to be outrageous criticism is to shake up professional certainties. The destabilization of intellectual complacency is the first concrete value of looking at ourselves from the vantage point of others. Although our essayists employ different techniques—Derridian probing on the part of Brothman and more direct challenges to current wisdom by Rowat—both share a purpose to disrupt a calm acceptance of generalities, to undermine practical routines as well as philosophical complacency. The process of questioning will compel some of us to respond; in the course of this response we will re-think our role and re-conceptualize archives. The outcome may be a reaffirmation of the received, or it may be the development of new lines of thinking. But whatever the concrete result, this process of constant renewal will help us to keep our vision clear and our affirmations strong. By purchasing the process of deconstruction or by indulging in passionate bursts of opinion, we do not necessarily have to buy products of these processes too. If the course of our response leads us to elucidate the nexus between theories and practices, then destabilization may achieve an apposite stability.

Secondly, a critical self-examination of our purpose and work, using the techniques and tools of other disciplines, also sharpens our practical skills as appraisers of records and as guides to users. Some commentators suggest that archives is a meta-discipline that embraces vastly divergent universes of ideas. Surely our abilities to react reasonably to the problems posed by diversity, particularly as it is manifested in records, and to respond sensitively to their complex meanings, is strengthened, inevitably, by a familiarity with the ideas and techniques of other disciplines. Rowat, for example, points out the ways in which archival practices may be deficient because they exclude values that are derived from artistic norms. Brothman's exploration of the techniques of deconstruction help us to understand the modes of thinking that are accepted and generally employed by theorists of text.

We could extrapolate a possible principle that our work may be better done if our reading is wide and catholic. It is entirely possible that our professional life may be enriched by the science fiction and the novels that we read, as much as, but in different ways than, the archive manuals that we cherish. Archivists have a body of knowledge that comprises the history, the science, and the art of the archives discipline. But there are also elements beyond that body of knowledge that make a significant contribution to the ways that we work and to the success of our various tasks. Paradoxically, as Brothman points out, the effective essence of these elements—that which makes them useful—is destroyed by the act of definition. Curiosity, for example, and the stimulation that comes from experiencing something different, help us to see what we do in a new light and in a clearer perspective. No one would argue with the assertion that knowledge and perspective are both essential ingredients in appraisal. No one, I think, would disagree with the conclusion that the process cannot be defined in such a way that it can

be performed, like a mathematical calculus, by a machine. Knowledge is essential, perspective is essential, but so too is a quality of humanity that comes from a curiosity about that which is different and a willingness to change and become something new.

Thirdly, looking at our professional norms and tropes, especially from the perspective of an outsider, shows how vastly different are our temperaments, beliefs, and convictions. In recognizing this basic fact we may more easily accept that it is a biased memory we are building, and better understand how the building process works. Recognizing that archives and archival work are relative rather than absolute should not lead us either to despair or to inaction. Recognition should do quite the opposite. It should help us acknowledge and then declare our biases in such a way that archivists and users in the future can understand us and our ways. Recognizing these biases also may be turned into a factor that helps us develop strong acquisition programmes, by turning the problem of appraisal into a solution based on the logical truth of a principled process, as is now recommended by those who advocate documentation strategies. Acknowledging biases, divergence of either opinion or conviction should encourage us to question what appear on the surface to be obviously correct decisions. While we may or may not change these decisions, the very process of asking the questions will strengthen the memory we create by making it more intelligible to future generations.

Fourthly, questions ventured from the perspective of someone who is not a practitioner may be dismissed as being misinformed, they may prompt a response in which the underpinnings of argument are systematically exposed and new ones erected as a counter, or they may be ignored as being irrelevant. Whatever the specific response, however, the exchange among critics helps us to understand ourselves better and to conceptualize archives in different ways, as memory, as a sign, as a literary form, as a form of communication, as a record, as a symbol, as a domain of privilege. The process of making these shifts in concepts clearly reveals that archives do not have just one meaning, but rather that they have many meanings that may be in conflict with one another. Meaning is derived from the conviction of each individual. There is not just one "correct" metaphor that is pursued in archives: there is a vast number. Consider, for example, the metaphor "truth" explored through a dialogue of historical argument; the metaphor of "privilege" confirmed by a discourse of authority; the metaphor of "right" developed in social discourse; the pursuit of validation undertaken through an exploration of the past.

Given the variety of truths in any archives, we should enhance the conditions that assist users to find personal meanings in the archives they use rather than concentrating exclusively on directing researchers to the meanings that we intended. The experience that an archives provides is, after all, in the interface of users with documents. We should not be creating situations that purport to lay out a truth, but rather ones that lay out opportunities to enjoy a truthful experience. The rational order of our archives, one that we strive to create and continue to develop methods to improve—after all, what else is the drive to descriptive standards—is not the way that individuals are actually stimulated by archives. Serendipity, symbol, and lateral thinking are attributes that may equally lead to discovery. We need to nourish that experiential aspect of archives and of archival work. The past is powerful, whether it be the power of symbol, of fiction, of fantasy, or of reality. Recognizing this, we should be better able and with greater sensitivity to present a well-balanced menu to individuals who want to experience a past that is provided in documents.

Fifthly, looking at ourselves from the outside should encourage us to pursue "venture" archiving—akin, if you like, to "venture" capitalization and "venture" research. Ideas that go beyond the accepted and the projects that they spawn should be supported as a valid means of stretching our concepts and extending our limits. Work with new media, new combinations of individuals and documents, and, perhaps above all, new links among existing and hitherto enclosed institutions, will be better appreciated and eventually implemented by venturing out. We should encourage and support experimental projects and unusual activities for what they will teach us about ourselves.

The final practical use that I see for the generally disturbing activity of looking at ourselves through someone else's glasses is that this action makes us aware of the immense complexity of any archives. The process of accumulation is long-term, transcending generations. Archives move in a time frame of the *longue durée*. What we think is significant today may not be perceived quite the same way in thousands of years. This sobering fact should affect us in three seemingly divergent ways. First, we should be driven to pursue a detailed and careful study of documents, of their forms as individuals and as aggregates. This knowledge would seem to be indispensable to us in appraisal, acquisition, and public service. Our focus on documents is a distinction that gives us a strong identity. Secondly, we should also be stimulated to explore our own history, as a profession and as a discipline, and that of the documents in our care. Archives history is essential for our health as a profession and for our ability to respond knowledgeably to the direct or implied criticisms levelled at us from those who know us only from what they see today. Thirdly, we must acknowledge that permanency and continuity have many facets of meaning. There is, for example, a broader cultural significance to the records we lay by for the future beyond their values as context-sensitive information—and here I would characterize an information system as a "record" as much as is an individual document. We should be tempering our concepts of accumulation to take this long view into account. We should modify the strict canons of institutional rationality and management system that govern archival activity, to acknowledge values that transcend due process and to encourage other professional metaphors that may be derived from archival theory. An archives may not be just a collection of information possibilities; it may be a cultural object and it may even be a work of art.

Looking at archives from the point of view of an outsider helps us understand that archives have the power to transfigure. That experience is not inevitable nor is its occurrence always related to rational study, carefully weighed assessments, and logical conclusions. What is the point, then, of our professional work? To bring the past into a relationship with the future via the present is the archivist's vocation, to quote the recently appointed incumbent to the Chair of Archive Studies at the University of London, Professor Jane Sayers. We cannot bring this about by following, slavishly, the instructions in a recipe book or in a manual. Brothman suggests that one of the enduring meanings of archives is that it empowers us to write or to produce history that bears some reference to the past. Perhaps archives are more than just places of empowerment or experiences of insight, enabling the historian by the past they preserve, enabling the scientist by the information they contain, enabling the genealogist because of the names and relationships that they record. Our archives are the universally valid products of certain human activities. They are not lumbered by "dead certainties," in Simon Schama's delightfully ironic phrase, but are sustained by "live possibilities" and the accidental encounters waiting to happen. Looking at archives from a bird's eye view is not just a flight of fancy—perhaps an entertainment for the regulars at a coffee-break. By looking inward from the vantage point of others, we help to re-create the archives and to refine both our theory and our methods.

## NOTES

- \* Commentary on papers by Theresa Rowat and Brien Brothman, presented at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Montreal, 17 September 1992. The resulting articles by Rowat and Brothman follow this commentary.