

## ***What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?***

by **TERRY EASTWOOD**

John Roberts has strenuously and colourfully denounced the idea of archival theory. He does not believe that it can be developed to any useful effect. The blunt point of his argument is that archivists “save what is historically valuable—there; that is the theory.”<sup>1</sup> He sees archives as consisting of either content to be exploited or context to be elucidated as an aid to understanding the meaning of content. In either case, what can be known can be derived from the knowledge of other disciplines, but that knowledge “cannot be distilled into a coherent archival theory that would be useful.”<sup>2</sup> He rejects the idea that archives have any common characteristics. “Archival work is intrinsically, inescapably ad hoc. There is no big picture ...” because of the “endless variability of [the] subject matter” of archives.<sup>3</sup> Roberts argues that archival literature is and should be solely concerned with matters of technique and procedure. In the course of his arguments, he presents the kernel of his own theory. Because the work of the archivist is all about preserving sources for the study of the past, the market for sources determined by past research use of archives drives the processes of acquisition and selection. Subjects of interest are invented by historical scholars, and then archival materials to satisfy that interest are identified and preserved. The evaluative dimension of this process requires “the wisdom of the knowledgeable historian ... not the mechanical dexterity of a well trained archivist” mistakenly searching for unattainable objectivity.<sup>4</sup>

Roberts’s arguments raise questions about what theory is in general terms; what the purpose of theory is in the scheme of building knowledge about archives; what the object of archival theory is, what it looks at; and what relation theory has to method and practice.

### ***Defining Theory***

The word theory comes from the Greek *theoria* and more directly in modern use from the latin *teoria*, meaning a looking at, viewing, contemplation, or speculation. In English, the word came to mean mental view or contemplation from as early as the late sixteenth century. This sense of the word was captured by Norris writing in

1710 to the effect that “speculative knowledge contemplates Truth for itself, and accordingly stops and rests in contemplation of it, which is what we commonly call theory.”<sup>5</sup> We instinctively react to use of the word truth these days, but it is clear that Norris uses the word truth to denote understanding of the nature of the object of contemplation. The whole quest for human understanding of the natural and social worlds contemplates in one way or another the nature of some object or phenomenon, and seeks to explain its character or properties. Any quest to explain the nature of a thing for its own sake, merely to know what its nature is, is theoretical. This is one view of theory: a contemplation of some object done for the sake of understanding its nature.

A second sense of theory is more complex because it has grown in association with disciplined knowledge building. It denotes systematic ideas to explain or account for observed facts or phenomena. A theory in these terms consists of some proposition or set of propositions established by observation or confirmed by experiment, and generally accepted as accounting for known facts or phenomena. Playfair writing in 1819 on “Natural Philosophy” observed that “a theory is often nothing else but a contrivance for comprehending a certain number of facts under one expression.” Just as we suspect notions of truth, on account of the relativity of perspective of the observer of a thing, we have learned to appreciate the difficulty of establishing the facts of any given matter. Whether one takes the view that facts reside in the nature of things and therefore exist to be discovered or the view that they are generated in the process of thinking about things by the thinker, facts are the characteristics or attributes of the things we seek to understand. In all rational endeavour, we make the distinction between establishing the facts of the matter and interpreting or drawing conclusion from them. This distinction is ultimately a mental convenience, but a necessary one of all knowledge building.

Proposition or hypothesis is often confused with theory. “The word theory,” James Mill noted in 1869, “has been perverted to denote an operation ... which ... consists in supposing and setting down matters supposed as matters observed. Theory in fact has been confounded with Hypothesis.” A theory is not the supposition initiating contemplation. It is rather a mental construct derived from observation to explain the nature of the object of attention.

The difficulty of seeing clearly just what theory is becomes more difficult when we see that the method of contemplation may be deductive or inductive, working from the general to the particular or from the particular to the general. Using deduction, one generalizes, and then examines whether generalization holds in particular instances. Using induction, one examines a case to infer some general statement, and then examines other cases to confirm the statement. Deduction tends to favour the unifying tendency of scientific endeavour to seek out the general facts and principles of a thing common to all its instances. Deducers believe that “pure thought can grasp reality.”<sup>6</sup> Induction tends to favour the diversifying tendency of science to reveal the variety of expression or behaviour of the thing. Inducers believe that empirical investigation can discover reality. Both methods rest on observation to build generalization in the interest of understanding the nature of the thing. It is worth noting that the generalizations cannot be observed; they have to be thought out by the contemplator, in what, if it is systematic, will be theory.

Because generalizing is at the very heart of understanding things in the world *and* seeking to control those things, both the objects and the actions we take on them are subject to the theoretical impulse. Taking these grounds as our starting point, we can now look at the purpose of theory in the process of building knowledge about archives.

### *The Purpose of Archival Theory*

When contemplation is codified in disciplined study, we have the sense of theory as that part of a technical subject devoted to elucidating the general facts, principles, or propositions on which the subject depends, as distinguished from the practice of it. Disciplined study, by definition, works on some established rational principles, which constitute its method. In pure knowledge-building disciplines, the theory consists of ideas about the object under contemplation, the method consists of ideas about how to proceed in contemplating the object, and practice consists in the application of theory and method to extend knowledge. Such disciplines are pure in the sense that the knowledge seeker does not act on the objects contemplated, though of course it is now widely recognized that observers participate or become part of the thing observed, that is, cannot completely abstract themselves from the reality they observe.

The quest for knowledge for its own sake which characterizes pure disciplines is often distinguished from the application of knowledge by professions to assist in the conduct of human affairs. In the applied disciplines of the professions, practice is not the same as it is in pure disciplines, which strive solely to advance knowledge. Practice in an applied discipline is not directly about knowledge building, but rather about action to achieve some socially desired end. It is possible to subject that action, the methods of its undertaking, and its effects to observation and contemplation, but not separate from understanding of the nature of the object to which the action is pointed. For instance, the social worker cannot act without some knowledge of human nature and social structures. Having acted, the social worker can then think about the actions taken but not without considering them in the terms in which they were taken in the first place, that is, in terms of certain pre-supposed knowledge of human and social behaviour. The discipline of social work itself does not develop knowledge about such behaviour. That is the work of pure disciplines like psychology and sociology. So, do the professions only have method and practice, and reflection on them, and no theory? That is Roberts's contention in the case of the archival profession.

That professions take action in the world disguises that they build knowledge on which to base action in the same manner as the pure disciplines build knowledge. Every applied discipline operates on the basis of some abstract body of knowledge. The question is, how do applied disciplines develop their knowledge base, and what part does theory have in it?

Roberts assumes that the theoretical aspect of the archivist's knowledge has to be drawn from other disciplines. He further denies that there can be any consistency to practice, because action in any case must be suited to the particularities, even the singularity of each archives. Talk of universal methods in these circumstances is to him ridiculous. That would indeed be the case were his construction of it correct.

Professions do try to control circumstance in the world, but their practice consists in working out regimens of behaviour or action that suit the nature of the objects of action. If theory is contemplation of the nature of some object or some phenomenon seen as the object, then, for applied disciplines, theory and its method to determine the nature of the thing to be treated come before, and to a great extent condition, practice and its method. However much an applied discipline might rely on knowledge of other disciplines to build its theoretical picture of the nature of the things on which it acts, it cannot adopt that knowledge directly for its theory, because the grounds of its theory must suit its perspective and purposes. These matters are worked out in the evolution of the discourse of the discipline as it develops its way of contemplating the nature of things important to it. So, the theory, if it is fixed at once on the nature of the object on which the action is undertaken and on the action itself, can be pursued on its own account—just as knowledge-building in pure disciplines proceeds.

The added dimension with an applied discipline is that the theory relates to method and practice in the sense that nothing of the theory, if it is rightminded, will be contradicted by the method and practice. Thus, if method and practice are based on theory, they can become a test of theory. If method and practice based on theory do not work out, there may be something wrong with the theory. By contrast, methods and practices not based on some theory can presumably be judged only on pragmatic terms: whether or not they reach the practical ends set for them at the start. No systematically-arrived at mental view animates the exercise. Roberts takes the pragmatic view of the situation of the archivist. Of course, that is his prerogative. But he also denies that a theoretical view is possible.

### *The Object of Archival Theory*

He is forced to take that view by what amounts to his central theoretical assumption, that the essential nature of archives is bound up in their value as historical source. To repeat his words, archivists “save what is historically valuable—there; that is the theory.” The trouble with this view of archives is that it makes archives something for consideration in the philosophy and writing of history. That is presumably what Roberts means by saying that the only proper theoretical perspective on archives is historiographical. His conclusion is consistent with his premise, but the validity of his premise may be doubted.

From the archivist’s perspective and need, archives are not historical source material. The first object of archival theory is the nature of archival documents or records. The archival discipline consists in building knowledge about archival documents and acting upon them in methodical ways to protect the properties that they have. Thus, the large theoretical question is what are those properties that need to be protected, and why.

The roots of archival theory may be traced to certain ancient legal and administrative principles. In order to conduct affairs, and in the course of conducting affairs, certain documents are created to capture the facts of the matter of action for future reference, to extend memory of deeds and actions of all kinds, to make it enduring. Inherent in this conception of the document’s capacity to extend memory, to bear evidence of acts forward in time, is a supposition about the document’s

relation to fact and event or act. The matter at hand, the thing being done, produces the document, which then stands as a vehicle or device to access the fact and act.<sup>7</sup> Documents of this type then came to be regarded as having what jurists called full faith or public faith—or, as we would say, as possessing trustworthiness as evidence of fact and act—if they were preserved in an appointed place according to fixed and well understood administrative procedures. From this basis, the discipline of the archivist as keeper of the records grew.<sup>8</sup>

That discipline stands on two propositions, which certainly need extensive contemplation: that archival documents attest facts and acts, and that their trustworthiness is dependent upon the circumstances of their generation and preservation.

For centuries, archival documents were accumulated and kept by public authorities to attest to the acts that had enduring significance in the conduct of both public and private affairs. The document registered the act and provided the means to attest it and the rights and obligations associated with it. Most often the acts to be recorded and registered were associated with property rights, taxation, tithes, entail, and the like. However, in tune with the spread of literacy and with the growth of the institutions of public governance and conduct of private affairs, the central repository of enduring public memory and public faith gave way to regulated record-keeping practices in administrations of all kinds. Each fund of archival documents then stands as residue and evidence of the transaction of affairs, and provides the means to account for them. This potential for accountability is the intrinsic value of archives, a value bound up in their nature.

In the whole period from ancient times until the late eighteenth century, such contemplation of archival documents as took place was either among jurists attending to the evidentiary properties of archival documents, among those concerned with keeping them for administrative purposes, or among those who were interested in establishing the trustworthiness of documents to prove some fact or act (such as, for example, the diplomatists of the seventeenth century, who provide us with the first analytical model for understanding the nature of the single archival document).<sup>9</sup> In time, archives came to be seen as an integral part of the total fund of artifacts that could be used to gain knowledge of past human experience.

The writings of modern archival science rest on this earlier body of reflection and experience of archives, but very significantly arise in conjunction with conscious endeavour to preserve the sources of the past in institutions dedicated to that purpose. The result is the modern perspective on archives. Modern writers characterize archives as the whole of the documents produced by either organizations or persons in the course of their affairs, and attend to the properties of these aggregations of documents and to the means of their treatment. Much confusion arises about the place of theory and its relation to method and practice; this is because modern writings, at least for the most part in English, have attended more to the means of treatment than to questions of the properties of the material itself. It is useful to summarize some of the main properties of archives adduced in these writings: consideration of them provides answers to several of the questions raised by Roberts's contentions. The explanation of these properties constitute the central ideas of archival theory. In each case, the explanation of the property generalizes about some universal characteristic or quality of archives. It is these properties that need protection, so method and practice work from the theory.

The first characteristic of archives—their impartiality—establishes the archival perspective on the relationship between facts and interpretation that Frank Burke proposes that archival theory investigate.<sup>10</sup> The theoretical notion of impartiality in archival science is widely misunderstood—even, one suspects, by Schellenberg, who omits it from his discussion of the essential qualities of archives.<sup>11</sup> Because archival documents are created as a means to express action and as a product of that action, they are, as Jenkinson put it, “free from the suspicion of prejudice in regard to the interests in which we now use them.” That does not mean that their creators and authors are free from prejudice, only that the reasons and circumstances of their creation insure that they were not written “in the interest or for the information of Posterity,” as Jenkinson says.<sup>12</sup> If the document is impartial in this sense, we may put our faith in its faithfulness to the facts and acts of it. Of course, if it is corrupted by the taint of later interest, this quality is impaired. Because archival documents hold this promise of faithfulness to fact and act, they also threaten to reveal facts and acts which some interest would rather not see revealed. Protecting records from corruption is then a duty of archivists, whose methods and practices need to be devised as far as possible to preserve impartiality.

Neither does impartiality mean that the interpreter of the document may take it that the document somehow replicates an act or event. The larger context of the event and the context of the interpreter’s use of the document leave ample room to complicate what truth can be derived from the document, impartial as it is in these theoretical terms. So long as the use does not corrupt the document, such fidelity to event as it possesses remains undiminished. So, all questions of interpretive use are of no consequence to archival theory; they lie outside its bounds and concern—not inside, as Burke intimates, or as Roberts’s suspicions of the archival perspective on objectivity would suggest.

The second characteristic of archives is authenticity. Authenticity is contingent on the facts of creation, maintenance, and custody. Archives are authentic only when they are created with the need to act through them in mind and when they are preserved and maintained as faithful witness of fact and act by the creator and its legitimate successors. To be authentic memorials of past activity, documents must be created, maintained, and kept in custody according to regular procedures that can be attested. Naturally, these contingencies—which endow the document with authenticity—are observable not in the document itself but rather in the procedures. The scope of archival theory, therefore, extends beyond the documents themselves to encompass consideration of the procedural context of their generation and preservation. That is, it looks not only at the methods and practices of the historical repository, but also at the methods and practices by which documents are generated and preserved from the moment of creation and throughout their existence. Many archival documents stray from this legitimate realm of continuous proceduralized custody. They may still be attributed value as documents evocative of the past, but their evidentiary property is impaired. While attempts may be made to repair the loss either by gathering evidence of the history of the documents in question or by internal analysis of them, their trustworthiness as evidence is suspect in comparison with archives kept in continuous legitimate custody.

The third and fourth characteristics, naturalness and interrelatedness, both concern the manner in which the documents in an archives accumulate in the course of

the transaction of affairs according to the needs of the matters at hand. They are natural, in the sense that they are not collected for some purpose outside the administrative needs generating them, and not put together according to some scheme to serve other than those needs, as are the objects in a museum or the documents in a library collection. The documents in any given archives then have their relationships established by the course of the conduct of affairs and according to its needs. The relationships among the documents and to the affairs make it axiomatic that no single archival document can stand as sufficient memorial of the course of past activity; they are interdependent for their meaning and in their capacity to serve as evidence of the activity that generated them. This is why archival theory dwells on the vital link between functional activity and document, and on the structure of administrative documentation. Understanding of both the function giving rise to the documents and their structure becomes vital to the development of method and practice.

When Roberts supposes that contemplation of the nature of matters of function and structure—such as is involved in determining what a series is—glorifies technique, he misses the theoretical significance of conceptualizing how an archives forms itself in general terms. Without some understanding of the dynamic of naturalness and interrelatedness, treatment is very likely to impair the functional and structural bonds that bind the documents together in a whole whose integrity is important to their meaning, significance, and value as evidence. Neither the wisdom of Roberts's historian interested in mining the content of documents nor his archivist as mechanically-minded technician is likely to perceive and preserve this aspect of archival integrity. It takes theory to perceive the characteristic, and it requires method devised in the light of theory to preserve it. Examples of historians who have ordered archival documents to their own devices, and mechanics of one kind or another who have schematized order and destroyed integrity, are not hard to find.

The final characteristic is uniqueness. Each document has a unique place in the structure of an archives. Copies of the document may exist in the same archives or in others. Each one is unique in its place. Being there signifies its relationship to activity and to the other documents accumulated in the course of that activity. So every archival document, whether existing in more than one copy or not, is unique. It might also be noted that the information or content of any given archival document, seen as intelligence of the world, may or may not be unique. Of course the information in the document *in its context* and in its relationship with other documents in an archives is unique. Nowadays, however, so much of the intelligence that can be gleaned from archives is available elsewhere, usually in more convenient and accessible forms. This only reinforces the view that archives cannot be treated solely or even primarily for the information they bear. That view is a theoretical proposition following from consideration of the nature of archives, and one to which some modern authorities adhere and others do not—demonstrating that theoretical ideas are not doctrine but open to debate.

### **Conclusion**

These five concepts explain why archives cannot be treated solely for their content, for the information they bear—which is basically what Roberts argues. Neither

historical science, library science, nor any other science explains the nature of archives in terms apposite to the purposes of the archivist. That is why we may claim for archival science an autonomous status, worthy of being pursued in its theoretical, methodological, and practical dimensions to build a coherent body of knowledge.

The starting point is theory, which aims to generalize about the nature of archives in order to set the intellectual framework for method and practice. The starting point of theory is to determine the characteristics common to all archives. The five characteristics I have identified are regularly and widely mentioned in archival literature in one way or another. They constitute the organic theory of archives. Of course, it is entirely open to the scholar to demonstrate that one or all of them are not universal characteristics of archives, and therefore unworthy of the universal attention of the archivist, just as it is open to them to generalize in other ways about the nature of archives and about method and practice.

Much of a theoretical nature needs to be elaborated. For instance, we are far from understanding what we mean by function in archival science, and how function governs creation of records. This is especially so in an administrative environment transfixed by information management and suffused with technology that appears to threaten the integrity of archives. If the five characteristics constitute the organic theory of archives, then the validity of the theory—even in a rapidly changing documentary environment—is something for our contemplation. Nothing short of the trustworthiness of the evidence of fact and act is at stake, and with it our capability to judge past action for all the many purposes we unavoidably do.

In the end, then, theory becomes more than contemplation of the nature of archives when it presents ideas about the role or purpose archival documents play in social relations. That people regularly use archival documents to bring back memory of action—and, having done so, to judge it in some context—imparts a sense of mission to the archival endeavour. Theory dictates the social agenda of archivists, who stand as protectors of evidence to ensure that social relations may be pursued on objective grounds—that is, on the grounds of evidence of fact and act. Argument about what the facts are, what acts there were, or how best to judge them, is not avoided, but every arguer proceeds with the same assurance of the quality of the evidence bound up in archives, if archivists proceed and act according to the lights of the theory.

In the end, then, every idea about the nature of archives, the circumstances conditioning their qualities, and the purposes for which they are generated and used is subject to analysis from the archivist's perspective. If theory in the broadest sense is nothing but the analysis of ideas, every aspect of the materials and the methods and practices by which society, and the archivist acting for society, treats them is subject to theory. Because John Roberts has ideas about the nature of archives as historical source materials, about the methods and practices of treating them to serve historical research, and implicitly about the purposes and value of historical understanding in society, he can be said to present a theory of archives, but it is ultimately empty of meaning for the archivist, as he himself sees.

Concentration on archives as the sources of the past, on research use of archives to write history, and on the value of historiography as a vehicle to promote under-



standing of the past raises questions beyond the need or competence of archivists to answer, and necessarily leaves Roberts to denigrate the very concept of archival theory. Above all, this unproductive result of all his thinking recommends another approach to archival theory, one stemming from understanding of the nature of archives, and proceeding rationally to devise methods of treating them to protect their characteristics and inherent value, in order to promote their beneficial use for any and all purposes.

### Notes

- 1 John Roberts, "Archival Theory: Much Ado about Shelving," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987), p. 70.
- 2 John Roberts, "Archival Theory: Myth or Banality?," *American Archivist* 53 (Winter 1990), p. 117.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 4 *Ibid.*, and "Much Ado about Shelving," p. 71, where he cites Gregg D. Kimball, "The Burke-Cappon Debate: Some Further Criticisms and Considerations for Archival Theory," *American Archivist* 48 (Fall 1985), pp. 372-73 in support of his contention that "it is not reasonable to expect that the archival community can formulate theories to enable it to transcend its cultural moorings."
- 5 This quotation and the ones which follow from Playfair and Mill come from *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 1st edition (1901), s.v. "theory."
- 6 The words are Einstein's, quoted in Freeman Dyson, *Infinite in All Directions* (New York), p. 44, who speaks of unifiers and diversifiers in the history of science.
- 7 The sociologist Raffel, in the course of an investigation of hospital medical records, expresses the point I am getting at in these two statements:
  - (1) The events are not seen as produced by the record, but the record is seen as produced by the events.
  - (2) The events can occur and remain unrecorded, but the record cannot occur without the events.

These statements nicely reveal two important points. Events or acts produce records, but not all acts produce records. Only those acts to which further reference is needed generate records. Therefore, archives are never a complete record of actions, only those for which memorial is needed. This alone should destroy notions of archives capacity "to document society" or in any way provide a full record of the past. Stanley Raffel, *Matters of Fact: A Sociological Inquiry* (London, 1979), p. 24.
- 8 Luciana Duranti, "The Odyssey of Records Managers," *Records Management Quarterly* 23 (July 1989), pp. 3-11 and (October 1989), pp. 3-11 traces this history. See also her paper, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," *American Archivist* (forthcoming), where she discusses the concepts of perpetual memory and public faith.
- 9 On the diplomatists, see Luciana Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989), pp. 7-27.
- 10 Frank Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981), pp. 42-43.
- 11 T.R. Scheellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956), pp. 11-16.
- 12 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Oxford, 1922), pp. 11-12.