

Response to Terry Eastwood's Paper

by JOHN W. ROBERTS

It is a little surprising, after all the expectations for a debate over archival theory, that Terry Eastwood and I appear to be substantially in agreement on most points.

While Professor Eastwood correctly assesses my conviction that historiography should be the basis for most archival decision-making, he is mistaken when he says that I argue that archival theory does not and cannot exist. I may have implied that it *should* not exist, but I have never argued that it does not exist. Quite the contrary. I consistently have maintained that archival theory *does* exist, and, moreover, that a considerable portion of it is abysmal claptrap. By criticizing archival theory, I recognize its existence. My position is not that archival theory is impossible, but that it frequently attempts to do the impossible.

Therefore, as to the essential question over the existence or non-existence of archival theory, Eastwood and I are of one mind: archival theory does exist.

Professor Eastwood's views and my own are consistent in another important respect. My criticism of archival theory is not indiscriminate; nor, apparently, is Eastwood's praise of it. In a backhanded sort of way, then, we both have argued that there is worthwhile archival theory and flawed archival theory.

In my paper, I cited several examples of archival theories that I considered to be flawed. In his paper, Eastwood cited one or two examples of archival theory that he considered flawed—including my own previous writings on the topic.

On a less specific and more fundamental level, we even agree on what constitutes flawed archival theory. Eastwood suggested at least two areas where archival theory should not stray: objectivity with regard to interpretive use, and matters of content. And those are precisely the grounds upon which I criticize archival theory. Virtually all of the theoretical writings I have criticized are those that attempt to facilitate interpretive objectivity or those that attempt to circumvent content expertise with general formulas. In fact, Eastwood and I both seized upon the arguments of Frank Burke as an example of the former variety of flawed archival theory.

The weights-and-measures appraisal model, the fill-in-the-blanks documentation strategy theory, the content indexing experiment, and the Gerald Ham anti-weather-vane approach, which I criticized in my paper, are all examples of the latter variety of flawed archival theory: that which attempts to provide methodological answers to content-related questions. I believe that archival theorists have no business tackling such questions, and Eastwood seems to agree when he says that "concentration on archives as the sources of the past ... raises questions beyond the need or competence of archivists to know."

Just as important, Eastwood and I agree on what constitutes worthwhile archival theory. I do not dispute Eastwood's contention that archival theory should identify the properties of archives and devise methods to protect those properties. Within the craft literature, those archival properties would belong among the handful of principles I conceded were necessary and appropriate.

Necessary and appropriate as they are, however, they are not sufficient—and therein lies the one significant point of contention in this debate. Eastwood seems to be saying that the archival properties he identifies and the practices flowing from them are the be-all and end-all of archival work and are a fertile ground for further research. I believe that they are only a small component of archival work, and, as ideas, that they are neither difficult to grasp nor particularly stimulating.

Archival ideas—even those that are valid—are very small ideas. They can occupy an archivist profitably for just so long. Eastwood's five properties strike me as little more than an elaborate restatement of a single concept: provenance. And despite Eastwood's assertion that more research will be needed before we command a full understanding of ideas such as function, I believe the potential for really startling breakthroughs in this field are limited. While I disagreed with Gerald Ham's conclusions about archival theory, I totally agreed with his premises about archival reality: that archivists had failed to secure adequate documentation on vitally important issues. How much more documentation would flow by us into oblivion if, rather than studying content, we spend our time waiting for Godot to divulge the ultimate definition of *respect des fonds*?

It was the bombast of certain members of the profession who compared archival theory with the writings of Hegel and Wittgenstein that drove me to my apostasy in the first place. Inflating a few archival principles into the intellectual basis for a profession is analogous to taking material sufficient for a certificate course and pumping it up into a graduate degree programme. It is preposterous—and all the more so because it addresses only one aspect of an archivist's responsibilities.

About twenty years ago, an airline cockpit crew became so obsessed with determining what had caused a warning light to illuminate—as it turned out, it was merely a malfunctioning warning light—that they forgot to pay attention to their flight path and crashed their aircraft into the Florida Everglades, killing everyone on board. A similar fate may be in store for the archival profession if it becomes so distracted with deeper and deeper probes into areas such as the concept of intrinsic value that it loses sight of archival matters that go beyond archival properties and cannot be covered by archival theory.

It is true that the archival properties that Eastwood discusses are important. But archival properties and strategies for preserving them can only get archivists as far

as first base. Unless there is a market or a need for specialists in archival integrity—which some may argue but which I would deny—archivists must rely upon historical and organizational knowledge, and a knowledge of the content of records, once they have gotten past the basic considerations of archival properties. Indeed, that is the knowledge they must draw upon for the bulk of their work. I could imagine no less rewarding task, for example, than to appraise records based strictly on their archival properties. The knowledge an archivist needs to judge archival materials goes far beyond that. Even the best archival theories cannot so much as help an archivist discern value differences between the Magna Carta and Lester B. Pearson's high school yearbook, because those two documents could be absolutely equivalent in terms of their archival properties. Such concerns are *not* "beyond the need or competence of archivists," as Eastwood claims; rather, they are only beyond the need or competence of archival theorists.

Professor Eastwood and I agree, then, on most issues. We agree that archival theory exists; we agree that some archival theory is flawed; we agree that some archival theory is valid; and we agree on what constitutes both flawed and valid archival theory. Apart from the disagreement over the importance of valid archival theory to the overall archival mission, our differences over archival theory appear to be as insignificant as archival theory itself.