

The Archival Enterprise: Modern Archival Principles, Practices, and Management Techniques. BRUCE W. DEARSTYNE. Chicago and London: American Library Association, 1993. 295 p. ISBN 0-8389-0602-8.

In the preface to his book, Bruce Dearstyne writes that “professional archival work is an enterprise—a big, bold, and sometimes difficult undertaking” (p. ix). The content of the book clearly reflects this stance, not only in the way in which each topic is approached, but also in the physical amount of space dedicated to the discussion of management issues as compared to that reserved for the presentation of archival principles and practices. In fact, with the exception of Chapter 6, “Identification and Selection of Historical Records,” and Chapter 7, “Arrangement and Description of Historical Records,” in each of the other nine chapters, the description of archival practices is only a means for discussing management choices, the mention of archival methods is almost incidental, and only lip service is paid to archival principles. This is not accidental: the author prepares readers for the tenor of his book from the initial pages. For example, concerning archival theory, which he equates with “speculation,” he writes that “there are probably only five types of bedrock archival theory, and even here the ‘theory’ has strains of pragmatism and expediency.” The five types are: “the life cycle concept,” the fact that “appraisal of records is essentially an exercise to identify and measure important values,” “the principle of provenance,” the “principle of ‘original order,’” and the fact that “arrangement begins at the topmost or most summary approach (the entire repository), then proceeds downward with increasing detail” (pp. 16-17).

I believe that this book is directed to the library profession—to all those professionals who have been educated and trained as librarians and at some point in their career been given responsibility for “historical records,” most often in a managerial capacity. This would explain also why “the people who work with archival material” and their supervisors are not called archivists, and why archivists are defined in the book on the basis of training and competence. Probably, the ideal reader for this book would be the head of a library with a special collections division. Such interpretation is supported by the fact that the publisher of the book is the American Library Association. From this perspective, some of the characteristics of the book that I criticize are redeemed, and a sentence that I have spotted on page 178 acquires an entirely new light: “The presentations should be tailored to the audience, which will ... become bored or weary if presented with a lecture on the fine points of archival techniques.” While I believe that any reader would prefer a presentation of concepts and methods to the uncritical illustration of the spasms of a balkanized profession, this sentence explains the author’s approach.

The introduction attempts to establish “working definitions of key terms” according to “the commonly understood usages” (p. 1). However, as it is immediately clear to the reader, and later admitted, the author only tries to overcome the inconsistency of common usage by introducing the term “historical records” as a catchall substitute for the terms archives, collections, papers, manuscripts, and documents (p. 4). Finally, after having gone to the trouble of identifying all the key archival terms and providing them with some convenient meaning related neither to the nature of the entities in question nor to the historical development of archival thought and practice, the author (most of the time) falls back into the habit of

speaking of “archival records,” “archival programmes,” “archival significance,” and so on, without ever defining these terms.

The first chapter, “Archivists: Culture, History, Practicality,” begins with a strong statement of purpose: “Archival work is characterized by an accent on service—to the institutions where archivists work, to the records they save and maintain, and to the researchers who seek their help” (p. 9). Later, it is explained that the service to the records consists of promoting their use (p. 174). However, all the discussion that follows and continues in Chapter 2, “Historical Records Programs: Diverse Types, Common Elements,” Chapter 3, “The Age of Archival Analysis: Historical Records Conditions and Needs,” and Chapter 4, “The Professional Nature of Archival Work,” emphasizes the differences, the fragmentation, the insularity, and the lack of a common world-view within the American profession. Even the historical excursus on professional developments points to what has not been done or has been badly done (e.g., pp. 50-53). It is hard to see progress when the author provides no sense of what ought to be, and of what is the shared ground on which the profession stands. We are told that “archival work is important because historical records are important” (p. 17) and that archivists deal with history and the transmittal of historical knowledge. Later we are told that “the modern era is apparently not historical” (p. 52). If so, why do archivists exist? Who are they? On page three, archivists are defined as people who are trained, “qualified and competent to identify, acquire, manage, make available, and encourage and guide the use of, historical records.” Trained in what? The implicit answer is: management, history, some librarianship, and a certain number of routines and techniques. Qualified and competent on the basis of what? Managerial experience and involvement in professional activities, it seems.

“Administering Historical Records Programs” (Chapter 5) strictly concerns management. It presents a good overview of basic concepts and their application in the context of a cultural institution.

“Identification and Selection of Historical Records” (Chapter 6) is pervaded by the documentation strategy approaches, both those that are managerial (cooperation among archival institutions, definition of acquisition policies, and plans in the context of the institution’s mission, self-analysis, etc.) and those that are conceptual and methodological. While at the beginning of the book the author acknowledges the influence on his thinking of Schellenberg, who taught him a course in 1967, unfortunately every archival concept expressed in this chapter is contrary to both the letter and the spirit of Schellenberg’s writings. I am referring not only to concepts directly related to selection, its context, and its purposes; even the most basic concepts of records as reliable evidence of activity and decision making, and as instruments of accountability, are misconstrued. This continues in other chapters. For example, information accountability is defined as an “emerging concept” according to which the “people who create information using computers or other advanced technology are ... responsible for its management” (p. 231). Dearstyne also downplays Schellenberg’s emphasis on records management when he says that “schedule development and other records management activities ... may blur the archival program’s mission or even transform it into a hybrid records management-archival program, but it recognizes the essential connection between reten-

tion and destruction" (p. 102). Moreover, the statements that archivists "must also anticipate future research uses" (p. 105) and establish criteria "for documenting culture" (p. 106) put Dearstyne together with the new wave of archivists as engineers and designers of the historical record. Finally, in this chapter as in the rest of the book, the author's emphasis on the "missing elements" is overwhelming.

"Arrangement and Description of Historical Records" (Chapter 7) is the only chapter that might be directed to aspiring archivists or archival students, as it attempts to explain the principles governing those functions, some of the concepts on which they are based, a few techniques, and a few products. Most attempts are not intellectually satisfying, as in this paragraph: "It is possible to describe records at any level of detail ... Most archivists aim for something in between ... Description at the series level is a good compromise between something that may be on too global a scale ... and something that is too detailed" (p. 136). Some explanations are not sufficiently informative; some are wrong, as in this definition: "filing units may consist of folders, binders, docketts, dossiers or other methods of holding individual records together" (p. 134). Throughout the chapter there is no sense of what an institution's descriptive system is, on which pillars it rests, and how one element relates to the other. In addition, there is no sense of what information is fundamental and what information is just interesting to know. One might add that more editorial care would have caught the fact that the "Five Levels of Control" in the figure on page 133 are in fact six.

"Preservation of Historical Records" (Chapter 8) is a very detailed "how to" discussion, which presents minor routines and expedients together with major issues and vital measures, as if they all had the same weight. However, the author should be praised for having dedicated one entire chapter to the preservation function, which is too often underrated. The same must be said for the following chapters on "Research Services," "Promotional Marketing," and "Electronic Records": the main value is in the identification of the topics as ones deserving extensive reflection, discussion, research, and study.

In his preface to the book, Dearstyne writes that it "is intended for history, library and information science, and archival studies students, people working in historical records programs, their supervisors, and other people interested in the identification, care, and use of historical records" (p. ix). While I find it interesting that history, library, and information science students are listed before archival students as the primary audience for this book, and that the term "archivist" is carefully avoided when defining the audience of a volume that is so much about the archival profession and its pitfalls, I do not find it surprising. It is quite clear that this is not a book for aspiring archivists: it is not concerned with explaining the fundamental archival concepts, methods, and practices to anyone who actually has to use them in his or her own work. Moreover, the order in which topics and issues are presented and the way in which they are discussed (most of the what and whys are sorely missing) assumes a basic knowledge of the profession, its work, the debates in which it has been and is involved, and its main problems. This is the kind of knowledge that newcomers to the profession and students do not have. American archivists have such assumed knowledge, and they also understand all the other information conveyed by the book. The last thing that North American archivists

need is another manual representing the summa of their experience (where they have been and where they are now, with a focus on old issues and out-of-date information).

In conclusion, if one considers this book to be an effort to inform librarians entrusted with responsibility for supervision of archival work about the unique concerns of the archival profession in the United States (there is no use in pretending that this book deals with anything beyond the United States boundaries), and about some specific archival products, it is a laudable effort. It would have been much more useful, however, to present a less diversified and idiosyncratic picture of the archival profession and archival work, and to avoid the excessive detail when reporting the results of various empirical studies, in the description of routine practices, and in the illustration of professional “milestones” (e.g., certification is discussed more than archival finding aids). If the author had limited and properly defined the audience at the outset, the result of his effort would have been much better focused.

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