

Letters to the Editor

Dearstyne and The Archival Enterprise

(The Author Responds)

Luciana Duranti's review of my book *The Archival Enterprise* in the most recent issue of *Archivaria* has led to this letter, which I hope you will print. Such a thorough review from someone so highly regarded in the profession is appreciated, but several points in the review are a cause for concern because they misinterpret the book rather substantially. *The Archival Enterprise* attempts to present and interpret archival practices and management techniques, describe approaches to building strong programmes, and show the dynamic nature of the profession. The book presents much information and attempts to explain and interpret it in a way that will make it understandable to the audience. It says more than some archival books about archival *programmes* and what it takes to make them strong. Every book represents the author's insights and views but this one is based solidly in the archival literature and exemplary practices, as I hope the 240 footnotes and over 100 books in the bibliography attest.

The audience for this book is discussed in the very first sentence in the Preface as well as later on, and the purpose is also set forth in the Preface. Thus, the reviewer's lack of certainty on these two issues is puzzling. The use of the term "archival" is explained on page three and, I hope, used in a helpful manner throughout the book. The book certainly does not equate archival theory with "speculation," as asserted in the review. It says that archivists tend to be busy and seem to lack time for theoretical speculations and stresses that archivists' approach to the development and application of theory is "pragmatic, flexible, adaptable, and results-oriented" (p. 16).

The reviewer misinterprets a sentence on page 178. There, I advise archivists participating in meetings of professional associations made up of users, to tailor their presentations to their audiences, and advise them not to dwell on the fine points of archival techniques. She says this "explains the author's approach" to this book. It does not, and it is not clear how or why she reached that conclusion.

The reviewer uses provocative, negative terms like "spasms of a balkanized profession" and "what has not been done or badly done" to imply that the book is critical of our work. That is simply not the case. The book makes just the opposite

assertion—that the profession has grown, changed, progressed, and adjusted its approaches in response to changing needs. The book attempts to explain the development and progress of the profession, particularly during recent years. Chapter 4, “The Professional Nature of Archival Work,” delineates the development of the profession and the attempts of thoughtful people to strengthen it. One of the major points of the book is that the profession has deep historical roots but that it also keeps changing.

Nowhere does the book say or imply that the only “service to records” that archivists carry out “consists of promoting their use.” It is hard to see where that impression originated in light of the considerable space devoted to discussions of appraisal, arrangement and description, and preservation.

The reviewer states that the book says on page 52 that “the modern era is apparently not historical.” That certainly would be a strange assertion for an archivist to make! Read in context, my intent was obviously the opposite of what the reviewer implies it is. This is a section on problems and issues in historical records programmes. The point is that studies have shown that many programmes concentrate on the distant past rather than the recent past or the present. The full sentence from which that phrase is taken says: “The modern era is apparently not *historical* in the minds of many program managers, so recent materials—sometimes the entire twentieth century—are not collected.” As the rest of the paragraph, the rest of the chapter, and the other chapters in the book make clear, this is a problem or issue which needs to be rectified and which modern archivists are addressing.

The criticisms of the coverage of training also left me confused. The book discusses the professional nature of archival work; offers explanations of “archivist” from the SAA’s *Glossary*, an article in an SAA *Newsletter*, and a pamphlet issued by the Archivists’ Roundtable of Metropolitan New York and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference; discusses archival certification in detail; summarizes the SAA’s *Guidelines for Graduate Archival Education Programs*; provides one Civil Service description of minimum qualifications; reprints the SAA’s *Delineation of Archival Roles*; and includes additional discussion. It is not clear what more the reviewer would have wanted.

Perhaps more disconcerting was the reviewer’s comments on my views of T.R. Schellenberg. I characterize him as “the most influential teacher and writer on archival matters of his generation,” note his contributions, and try to explain the continuing influence of Schellenberg and his generation on our profession. But I hope the reviewer agrees that the profession has grown and changed significantly since the days of Schellenberg, whose writings date from the 1940s - 1960s! I do not believe there is anything inconsistent with acknowledging Schellenberg’s contributions and continuing influence and, at the same time, noting new ideas, change, and progress. In fact, that is a theme of the book.

The discussion of identification and selection does include documentation strategies, but, in fairness, I note that this approach is challenging, has limitations, has not been fully applied yet, and that “Archivists are still debating how best to adapt and apply the documentation strategy approach” (p. 109). The same chapter also discusses acquisition policies, programme capacity, and appraisal (with due credit to Schellenberg’s views!), and gives some examples. It is an attempt to provide sound, practical advice in a very challenging area.

The reviewer says the book deals with “old issues” and presents “out-of-date information,” but gives no examples of either. Again, I was left wondering what the point was. The discussion of issues is based in large part on the surveys and analyses of repositories, conditions, issues, and needs carried out by a majority of the states during the 1980s and early 1990s with grants from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, on the archival literature, and on my own experiences. Indeed, I believe I am accurate when I say (p. 44) that “...the period since the mid 1970s might well be called ‘The Age of Archival Analysis’ owing to the dozens of surveys, analytical studies, profiles, and reports on historical records programs and archival issues.” The information in the book is as current as I could make it; as noted above, it is based heavily in recent and, I believe, very sound professional literature and practice. One may find *The Archival Enterprise* not to his or her liking, but I do not believe it is outdated—yet!

Ms. Duranti did not find much positive to say about *The Archival Enterprise*. That is her right as a reviewer, and I respect it. Open discussion and even debate may enrich and advance the profession. But too many of the points in this review seem unfair, too critical, less than accurate, or represent areas where she apparently simply disagrees with my views.

Thank you.

Bruce W. Dearstyne

Albany, New York

Nesmith and The Rediscovery of Provenance

(Response to Heather MacNeil)

I want to respond to two points raised in Heather MacNeil’s review of my *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*. (See her “Archival Studies in the Canadian Grain: The Search for a Canadian Archival Tradition,” *Archivaria* 37 (Spring 1994), pp. 134-149.) I respond to clarify my position for her and readers of *Archivaria* because a misimpression is left by the review. Before addressing these two points, however, I want to thank MacNeil for a very thorough, thoughtful, and generally fair and favourable review.

One of MacNeil’s two main criticisms of the book is that I am “selective” in interpreting the Canadian archival tradition. She says that in my introductory article in the book I state that the “rediscovery of provenance” is the achievement of those who have approached the study of archives by focusing on the origins, evolution, and original characteristics of records and the functions and activities of institutions and private individuals that create them, that is, subjects that are part of what I call the history of the records. MacNeil adds that I believe “that the use of ‘historical research methodologies and interpretive insights’ characterizes the Canadian contribution to archival studies...” MacNeil misreads me when she comes to this conclusion. I do not hold that view and did not present it in the book. On p. 144 of her review she quotes several lines from page 10 of my article to support her conclusion. However, she omits from the passage she quotes the portion