

Letter to the Editor

The Real Problem with Archives Textbooks

Terry Eastwood, in his "From Practice to Theory: Fundamentals US Style," in the Spring 1995 number of *Archivaria*, has written a useful and engaging analysis of the Society of American Archivists' Archival Fundamentals Series published from 1990 through 1994. There are two basic problems with the review, however, both related to the primacy that my esteemed colleague places on such basic volumes or textbooks.

While Eastwood has provided some creative critiques, noted some important omissions, and chided the authors for some wrong assumptions--and I agree with many of these comments--he equates the state of a profession's knowledge as well as practice with the condition of its basic texts. In the first instance, both well summarized in the final paragraph of the review essay, Eastwood argues that the series "does not yet provide a comprehensive statement of fundamental theoretical concepts and the methods and practices flowing from them." He also contends, as well, that for this series to have done that "would still seem to run against the grain of the pragmatic and underdeveloped state of archival science in the United States."

If we use such basic texts, as Eastwood seems prone to do, as an indicator of the health of a profession in any country then we might have to conclude that Canada lacks a profession. Much of the innovative and important work of Canadian archivists has been published in reports, manuals and workbooks, studies by students, and, most significantly, the essays in the numbers of *Archivaria*--everything but anything approaching a fundamentals series. My comment is intended only to caution the author of this review about such sweeping generalizations based on textbooks such as those featured in the recent SAA series. Archival science is alive, healthy, and certainly not "underdeveloped" in many classrooms, repositories, and professional conferences in the United States.

My other concern speaks more to the educational value and use of the SAA Archival Fundamental Series, a matter that unfortunately Eastwood--the author of some of the most compelling essays on the need for archival education in North America--does not really discuss. He does not devote much attention to the issue of education, except to note that the Series does not reflect the SAA's own Master of Archival Studies guidelines. What I would like to state is that it is precisely for all the reasons that Eastwood gives and for all the criticisms he makes that the Series can be an

effective tool in the classroom. Neil Postman, in his most recent book on education (*The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* [1995]), has captured precisely my feelings about textbooks: "We can improve the quality of teaching and learning overnight by getting rid of all textbooks.... Textbooks ... are enemies of education, instruments for promoting dogmatism and trivial learning" (pp. 115, 116). Postman also goes on to contend that the best use of textbooks can be made by educators pointing out their fallacies and limitations and supplementing them with other materials. In the same vein, I want my students to read Maynard Brichford's 1977 volume on appraisal with F. Gerald Ham's 1993 volume with a score of other articles, reports, research studies, and monographs on the topic--many, I might add, published, summarized, or reviewed in *Archivaria*. In this way, they can learn how the profession's knowledge and practice have developed and grapple with many of the issues confronting archivists in the application of appraisal, and this can be done in a stimulating and fun manner.

The bigger problem is in the matter of what archivists in North America do read, although I have no real evidence for what they do and do not use (except for what I read in the citations of articles and books and hear discussed at professional conferences and on electronic listservs). I suspect Eastwood and I would agree that here is the larger problem, in that many archivists, pressed with daily responsibilities and limited resources, gravitate to basic, applied texts. While I agree that we need a "fundamental text on the nature of records," I am not sure this would be a best seller or command a sufficient market at all, and more's the pity that this is the case. While I agree that the SAA series omitted a "volume on records management," I must also acknowledge that there are many basic texts on records management available (although these are woefully poor and generally ignore archival records); but would one written from the archival perspective sell or even have a chance of being published? While there is not much on "US organizational history," another gap pointed out by Eastwood, there is an astounding array of volumes that can be used by archivists or that discuss records and record-keeping (such as JoAnn Yates's superb *Control Through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* [1989]). While there is not a new manual on legal matters, there is a growing body of legal literature on records and record-keeping that is quite accessible to North American archivists in the legal, government, and public administration journals and very useful for updating the Petersons's earlier work. We can go beyond this as well, and we can profitably encourage students to read anthropology, museology, history, material culture, historical archaeology, philosophy, information and library science, historic preservation, and a host of other disciplines possessing insights for our own inter-disciplinary based archival science.

All of this is to say that archival textbooks are imperfect pictures of what is going on in a profession and in the profession's institutions, and they need to be used in creative ways. If an archivist buys the SAA Series, and this is all he or she ever reads, then there is a significant problem. But the problem has less to do with the Series than with the archivist's attitude to his or her own professional knowledge.

For me, the SAA Archival Fundamental Series is fundamental only as providing the most general or concise statement of an area or function. Perhaps my colleague has read too much into what they intended to be. However, I do look forward to seeing the definitive archival textbook arriving from him someday; of course, it might

be definitive for only a brief time and perhaps only in Western Canada (befitting the rapidly changing nature of what constitutes archival knowledge). However, I applaud any efforts made by him or anyone else that will help to enrich my classroom experience. Personally, I have given up ever writing such a volume, in favour of trying to lower my golf handicap (I hear rumours that Eastwood's is lower).

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