

Book Reviews

Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practices in South Africa. VERNE HARRIS. Pretoria: National Archives of South Africa, 1997, vi, 73 p. Softcover (No ISBN).

The world has watched South Africa intensely over the past three decades. The media has filled our newspapers and televisions with the harsh brutality of apartheid, the reactions both peaceful and violent of blacks and their white liberal allies, the poverty of the squatter camps in the townships and widespread urban crime, the white landowning monopoly and resultant farm murders, the acute shortage of essential water-delivery systems to the black areas of a hot country, the internal tensions and sometimes warfare between black communities, and, recently over all of it, the serene grace of long-imprisoned, now-presidential Nelson Mandela as he attempts to stitch together the torn social fabric into a new democracy and a new nation.

Part of any national fabric is reconciling the present and the past, by recognizing and respecting shared as well as differing memories. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) still operating in South Africa has had that vision for the last three years at the very core of its mandate. Under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the purposes of the TRC are both an expiation of past evils through recalled memories and a national catharsis through confession and forgiveness rather than retribution. In creating a new country out of one rent by group bitterness and personal tragedy, South Africans and their government have recognized since 1994 that archives are essential to the processes of nation building and national reconciliation. Given the pressing needs of the country on so many fronts, it may seem surprising that a new national archives act (reproduced in this book) was a very high priority and the first piece of cultural legislation passed by the new government. Yet this surely confirms the public importance of history and societal memory, and of control over the past.

Verne Harris, the author of the volume under review, has been the key

spokesperson for the National Archives of South Africa in hearings before the TRC, as it explores the illegal records-destruction as well as the records-keeping practices of the apartheid regime. Alas, explorations of the TRC into archival and records issues await another day. But not by coincidence, Harris is also the deputy director within the National Archives of South Africa, with responsibility for the "transformation" of the country's entire archival system and its very conception of what archives are. As transformation leader, he reports directly to the National Archivist. Readers of this journal have already been exposed to Harris' views and the transformation challenges which South Africa faces, through his "Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990–1996" which appeared in *Archivaria* 42 and won the W. Kaye Lamb Prize as best article for its year.

This small book under review is a continuation of his thinking and an important symbol of the transformation of archives in South Africa. In assuming that readers are familiar with the content of the "Redefining Archives" article, I want to focus more on the symbolic significance of this book and its implications for a wider archivy. As an aside, Canadian archivists will be interested to learn that in this transformation process, Harris and his colleagues have followed Canadian developments closely since the apartheid walls came down. (Harris also spent two weeks in intensive study at the National Archives of Canada in 1995.) As an example of one set of Canadian approaches adopted, the National Archives of South Africa has formally adopted the functions-based macroappraisal concepts and strategy pioneered by the National Archives of Canada.

The previous Afrikaner regime also valued history and archives very highly, seeing both as affirmation of their superior values and confirmation of their legitimacy as a ruling Volk or people. To these ends, vast quantities of public records were protected (typically more than fifteen per cent, as contrasted to the North American retention of less than five per cent, and typically one or two per cent). New and substantial archives buildings were opened every three or four years to house this mountain of paper; archives thus kept pace with the impressive Afrikaner historical monuments that dot the country. Like the apartheid regime itself, the archival system was tightly centralized, with the State Archives Service, as it was then called, being responsible for the records of the national, state, and local governments and judiciaries, even local utilities. Its archival principles and methodologies were based largely on the Dutch Manual of one hundred years ago, for the international boycotts since the early 1960s meant that few South African archivists were welcomed outside the country, fewer international archivists visited, and only a trickle of world archival literature arrived. Traditional archival strategies designed to cope with the documentary residue of European bureaucracies spoke but faintly to the archival and memory needs of the black majority, with their oral traditions and formal exclusion from the state and its operations, and beyond a tiny clientele of elite

academic researchers, very imperfectly to the challenges of modern appraisal and electronic records or to the archival needs of society.

In this situation, the new government determined that it must break the Afrikaners' control of archives, and thus their control of the past. Discussion centred on whether the whole system should be abolished, and the funds supporting archives turned over directly to black and coloured communities for oral history and community heritage projects, or whether the archival system should be maintained, but utterly transformed. The latter route was chosen, and thus the new archival legislation, and a new approach where archives in South Africa will be decentralized and devolved to provincial and local jurisdictions, will support private-sector and oral memory, will engage a much broader and more diverse clientele, and will imaginatively address the problems of modern archives rather than defend the past for its own sake. In marking this archival transformation, Harris' book offers the finest representation, short of being on the ground and watching the process first-hand.

The surprises continue. This book is really an extended personal essay formally sanctioned by government – something almost unimaginable in most of the world's bureaucracies, and certainly in pre-1994 South Africa. The National Archivist, Marie Olivier, took this courageous step despite the extreme sensitivity of archival issues in her country. She explains that, "in commissioning this work I resisted the temptation to produce a multi-authored, 'official' account. This would have been to opt for a constrained approach with a necessary bland result. The individual voice gives the text a coherence and muscularity it would otherwise have lacked (p. v)."

Indeed! Whereas the Dutch Manual (previously "the bible of South African archivists," p. 1) was the careful product of extensive committee deliberation and then summary by three authors, and reflects the extended qualification and deliberations of its origins, *Exploring Archives* is filled with soul and spirit. It ranges across the entire archival landscape, and does so with imagination and flair. It attempts on the surface to fulfil one of the new aims of the National Archives of South Africa: to provide professional leadership by presenting the first home-grown introductory text on archives. And its influence in this regard is spreading as South Africa assumes its natural archival leadership in the region; the book was given to each of the hundreds of delegates to the July 1997 conference of the Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA). But at a deeper level, it challenges archival discourse, suggesting new ways within the South African context of seeing archives, and of making archives be "seen," overcoming their past "invisibility" to all but a tiny, privileged elite (p. 1). Archives are "a unique and vital public resource," although the ways archivists render them invisible, almost sacrosanct, might suggest otherwise, and not only in South Africa.

Harris admirably centres his analysis in recent post-modern and post-custodial thinking about the profession. His "fundamental assumption" is that

archival theory and practice is not static, or somehow fixed in time, but “dynamic,” where “the thinking of archivists is shaped by the society in which they find themselves (p. 1).” The same is true of the records themselves:

Archives, of course, have no inherent meaning, significance or value. The record, in other words, does not speak for itself. Society, of which records creators, archivists and the users of archives are part, determine a record’s meaning, significance and value. Political, economic, cultural and other factors all play a role. ... every record in an archives has been shaped by the processes of creation, short-term (or contemporary) use and archival intervention (p. 5).

Harris is particularly good on this issue of archival intervention, rightly dismissing traditional archival nostrums of objectivity or neutrality as the chimeras they always were. He concludes, as he reviews all the principal archival functions and issues, that we as archivists “are having to shift our focus from archives to archiving, from physical things to processes (p. 37).” And in the analysis of these complex processes that should underpin all archival decision-making, Harris argues eloquently that “broad scholarly skills and experience” are “essential attributes for archivists,” and that if anything, these “are becoming more important as we move into the electronic, post-custodial era. ... Intellectual vigour is a prerequisite for success, irrespective of the archivist’s institutional context or area of specialization (p. 41).”

In this blend of scholarly research, record-keeping, and archival processes, combined with dynamic public programming and post-custodial thinking, Harris sees hope for radically transforming the archives and memory politics of his country. He concedes that the journey has only begun, that consensus is not yet achieved, but asserts that the discourse is changing in this direction, and one now nicely captured in this volume (which, in addition to the new *National Archives of South Africa Act*, also includes an extensive bibliography to help readers move beyond this introductory essay, and a reprint of the Code of Archival Ethics of the Society of South African Archivists).

This small volume is a clear window into the transformation of South African archives, as well as South African society, from its apartheid past to a multicultural and post-modern future. It unabashedly positions the archivist and archival work well beyond their traditional, passive, curatorial posture, and sees archivists and archives as active agents in the political and social process. Archives are not just storehouses of memory, but active sites of social contestation for shaping that memory. As an imaginative blueprint for the archival endeavour, *Exploring Archives* is a recommended read for Canadian archivists.

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