

Book Reviews

Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice. BARBARA CRAIG. Munich: K.G. Saur Verlag, 2004. 224 p. ISBN 3-598-11538-5.

Appraisal is arguably the aspect of archival theory and practice which has developed most over the past decade. Debate over appraisal methodology, purpose, and tactics has been lively in the pages of archival literature, including *Archivaria*. Most of this debate, however, has been in the form of articles and documents describing specific practices, theories, or issues. There has been little written which attempts to synthesize the recent discourse. Craig's is therefore a timely work, providing an up-to-date overview of appraisal thinking in the early twenty-first century.

In reviewing this book it is important to recognize what it aims to do, and what it does not. Craig is clear that "it is not intended to be a manual." Rather, she provides an introduction to the concept of appraisal, its purposes and development, and seeks to identify areas of agreement in current thinking. While a range of contemporary methodologies are outlined, this is a work of reflection, not instruction.

Appraisal means many different things to different people: for Craig archival appraisal is "the intellectual activity of weighing the relative value of records to decide which ones may be destroyed and why, and which ones must be kept and why – to serve the lasting interests of a larger community over a period of time" (p. 2). This in turn is situated in a more general concept of appraisal, which includes "valuation for the purposes of capture, keeping, control, and disposal" (p. 28).

This activity is carried out by archivists in a wide range of organizational settings. A real strength of this book is its recognition of the diversity of environments in which archives operate – the discussion is relevant and accessible to all. For example, the difficulty in applying functional analysis to personal papers is described. Craig's discussion of appraisal is one that acknowledges that this activity is not just a theoretical construct, but a task carried out in the

real world. The analysis shows a refreshing pragmatism, without compromising the emphasis on the importance of sound theoretical underpinnings. Appraisal is well understood as a tool for resource allocation, and the practical limitations of time and money facing archivists are similarly expressed. The latter constraints may hinder the delivery of perfect appraisal, but they are the reality within which we work – as important in their own way as the socio-cultural milieus within which appraisal is conducted.

Craig sees appraisal as a fundamental archival process embedded in all archival tasks (p. 44). In particular she sees appraisal as increasingly prominent in current record-keeping activity, predicting “the needs of history and of public accountability seem likely to merge in the future” (p. 32).

In seeking areas of consensus on appraisal, Craig sets herself a major challenge. A number of points of agreement are identified: the importance of some form of functional analysis as an appraisal tool; the need for appraisal itself to be documented; and the rejection of ad hoc, passive, document-centric appraisal. Overall, however, Craig concludes “we do not have ways of measuring what constitutes a successful appraisal” (p. 113). This assessment, with which I agree fully, represents a major challenge to the profession. Appraisal is a central – even defining – aspect of our professional identity. Craig goes so far as to assert that “the most important role of the archivist as a records professional is to design procedures of appraisal which allow assumptions to be articulated” (p. 33). Yet we are unable to identify when we are discharging our responsibilities well. Craig sees the basis of this in the diversity of settings within which we operate, but she is also fundamentally optimistic about the ability to agree and argues that “it is in the area of procedure and documents that appraisal can be placed on common ground in all institutions” (p. 107).

Inevitably one has some minor quibbles: Craig’s criticism of the *International Standard for Information and Documentation: Records Management* (ISO 15489) and the *Australian Standard for Records Management* (AS 4390) that “neither addresses appraisal of records undertaken at some remove from their creation, or in the context of social goals” (p. 114) seems unduly harsh. ISO 15489 paragraph 9.2 refers to the assessment of “... social or other positive gains from preserving records to serve the interests of research and society as a whole” and indicates this is likely to mean retention of records which “contribute to the building of an organization’s memory for scientific, cultural or historical purposes” – hardly a failure to address appraisal for social goals. Overall though, there are few such concerns: the book’s description of recent projects and documents is both concise and accurate.

For this reviewer, the main weakness in the book lies in the appendices. Over fifty pages are devoted to these, but they lack context or explanation. Particularly Appendices 4 and 5 – the mandate and acquisition policy and appraisal criteria for the City of Toronto Archives – seem unconnected to the body of the book. This is not to criticize the documents, but rather to suggest

they need a commentary to relate them to the issues discussed in the main text. This absence of connection is noticed by contrast with the introductory study guide. Rather than provide a simple bibliography, Craig gives a twenty-page summary of recent appraisal writing, highlighting key pieces, and placing them succinctly in context.

In summary then, this is a valuable book, providing an accessible and current overview of appraisal, and is highly recommended for anyone seeking an up-to-date summary of thinking in this area.

John Roberts
Archives New Zealand

No Innocent Deposits. RICHARD COX. Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004. 304 p. ISBN 0-8108-4896-1.

There are likely few archival topics which provide archivists with a greater sense of thrill and at the same moment greater trepidation than appraisal. With the opportunity to glimpse into the past tempered against the responsibility of shaping the past with their decisions, archivists involved in appraisal face a difficult task. In his book, *No Innocent Deposits*, Dr. Richard Cox, professor at the School of Information Sciences at the University of Pittsburgh, allows the reader to journey with him through the evolution of some of his thinking on the topic. The book, whose title is gleaned from an oral historian's perception of archives, is a compilation of essays and papers written by Cox over the past six or seven years. It presents the author's argument that archives "do not just happen" but rather are the constructs of archivists, records creators, individuals, and institutions (p. 12). Cox does not pretend to offer a how-to volume on the subject of appraisal but rather a series of reflections on various facets of the appraisal function such as collecting, the role of records management programs, evidential value, and the impact of the digital age.

Each chapter in the book is well documented with many examples and it is immediately obvious that Cox has read and researched extensively on the topic. The breadth of his own readings is evidenced by the wide-ranging list of sources at the end of each chapter. Hans Boom, Luciana Duranti, Terry Cook, David Bearman, Richard Brown, T.R. Schellenberg, and Margaret Cross Norton are just some of the prominent scholars referenced by Cox; however the myriad of authors, periodicals, and volumes listed in the sources is impressive, and for this reader slightly intimidating. For archivists interested in the subject of appraisal, the volume provides a comprehensive reading list.

In the introductory chapter, Cox outlines the nucleus of his thinking on the subject of appraisal, sets a societal backdrop for the rest of the book, and briefly introduces each of the subsequent chapters. The title of the chapter,