

# Introduction

## Exploring Perspectives and Themes for Histories of Records and Archives. The First International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA).

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RÉSUMÉ Ce texte explore des perspectives et des thèmes pour des histoires de documents et d'archives dans le cadre du premier congrès international sur l'histoire des documents et des archives (I-CHORA), qui s'est déroulé à Toronto en octobre 2003. Il examine les dimensions théoriques et historiques d'artefacts informationnels tels qu'ils se rapportent au travail quotidien de la gestion des archives, tout en mettant l'accent sur leurs relations synergiques. Nombre de ces liens entre les domaines de la théorie et de l'histoire des documents sont pris en considération en se référant aux communications de la I-CHORA et aux articles du numéro 60 d'*Archivaria*; notamment les liens qui sont déjà bien reconnus mais également ceux qui méritent d'être considérés comme des éléments essentiels aux pratiques de la gestion des archives. Les perspectives et les thèmes incluent l'alphabétisation archivistique et matérielle, la création de documents dans des contextes juridiques spécifiques, les méthodes comparées et d'études de cas pour poursuivre la recherche, l'usage et les usagers avec le temps, et les possibilités de futurs enrichissements interdisciplinaires.

ABSTRACT This paper explores perspectives and themes for records and archives histories in the context of the first international conference on the history of records and archives (I-CHORA) held in Toronto, October 2003. It addresses the theoretical and historical dimensions of information artefacts as these dimensions relate to the daily work of archival management, directing attention to their synergistic relationships. Many of these connections between the realms of records theory and records history, including ones that are well-recognized and others that have yet to be fully embraced as necessary parts of archival management practices, are discussed with particular reference to the I-CHORA papers and to the contents of *Archivaria* 60. The perspectives and themes include archives and material literacies, record-making in specific juridical contexts, comparative and case-study methods for use in further research, uses and users over time, and the possibilities for future inter-disciplinary enrichment.

In a climate suffused by an array of technologies for working and communicating, and in the face of a future orchestrated by profound changes in the traditional fabric of the archival and records professions, a conference devoted to the history of records and archives might seem to be an academic luxury of

little relevance to current concerns and issues. However, as many later observed, this conference was less a luxurious frill, and more a long overdue event that plumbed the core of an enduring archival mission to preserve records in rich context. The first international conference on the history of records and archives (I-CHORA 1) moved the metacontext of history to the centre stage. By promoting this theme and welcoming the multiple ideas it touched upon, the organizing committee hoped to encourage interdisciplinary sharing that was not possible in small interest groups assembled at discipline-specific or professional conferences.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary concerns in the workplace and society, looming issues related to the technical complexities of modern media, the unexpected demands from legacy systems, the exponential growth of record varieties, and the speed of obsolescence – important though these are – do not render any less important the core mission of archives to seek, preserve, and communicate the many truths of records and documents by exposing, exploring, and “reading” their many contexts.<sup>2</sup> Participants in I-CHORA repeatedly observed that contemporary issues were better addressed by professionals who were skilled at “reading” record as information artefacts that achieve their meaning only within their many contexts. The practical use of record keeping histories is especially pertinent to the practitioner who must appraise, build fonds and collections, describe materials, make connections across space and time, and contextualize the records within their immediate environment as well as within the broader socio-historical framework that shaped them.

The first international conference to focus on the history of records, records keeping, and archives took place in the fall of 2003 in Toronto. The ground had been well laid and we were confident that the event would be a success. The impetus for the conference came from the archives community. Many had noted the need for greater sophistication in conceiving the history of records

1 The following people were involved with various aspects of conference planning and management. Barbara Craig, Faculty of Information Studies University of Toronto, Philip Eppard, Department of Information Studies University at Albany, and Heather MacNeil, School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia comprised the committee that planned and organized the conference. Assisting the committee with its work were Paul Gardiner, Web master and co-ordinator of registration, and FIS masters students Sean Driscoll, Veronica Marshall, and Rod Cater. Rod also acted as scribe for the conference wrap-up session. The FIS office staff made our work light, especially Kathy Shyjak who handled accounts, Marcia Chen who co-ordinated refreshments, and Tony Lemmens and Ab Gehani who provided technical support. Paul Craig ran the on-site registration desk and managed the set-ups for meals and the reception. Session Chairs included Tom Nesmith, University of Manitoba, Gordon Dodds, Archives of Manitoba, Germaine Warlkentin, University of Toronto, Philip Eppard, University at Albany, James O’Toole, Boston College, Peter Wosh, New York University, Joan Schwartz, Queen’s University, Heather MacNeil, University of British Columbia, Terry Cook, University of Manitoba, and Richard J. Cox, University of Pittsburgh.

2 Many archivists have noted that we do not yet have a complete grasp of the number of contexts that are germane to the analysis and understanding of records and are in need of developing more sophisticated models of their many intersections.

to address the issues of human communicative practices and the artefacts themselves as material and social products. The explosion of interest over the past two decades in the history of the book suggested that the time might be right for a similar effort to develop an interdisciplinary approach for the study of the history of records and record-keeping practices in all their forms. This need for greater depth and nuance in conceiving and writing records history is progressively more evident as machines increasingly mediate recording practices. Digital formats, easily communicated through electronic networks, are also caught in faster cycles of innovation and change. The results of such a highly competitive market is a digital past that is quickly unreadable and lost. Many of the larger questions raised by computers underscore our need to understand the history of communication practices and the experience of earlier generations in dealing with similar revolutionary challenges.

Moreover, the recent focus of the archival profession on enhancing and sharing descriptions – through developing standards of practice informed by experience and by the needs of expert and novice users – has exposed many gaps in local knowledge about archival holdings, their custodial history, and their past lives as active instruments in administration and business affairs. This lack of knowledge hampers the full realization of the promise of standards in description. Records have content, but they also have histories linked to their origins and to their roles in the affairs of people and communities. This information is an integral part of any full archival description.

Many archivists were acutely aware that they lack their own history as a profession, particularly of the functions they profess as appraisers, selectors, preservers, and enablers of use. Like the cobbler's children who are poor in the very products the cobbler purveys, archivists are discovering, or re-discovering that their work, their institutions, and their materials have a rich history that is neither obvious, simple, transparent, nor beyond debate.

Choosing the theme of records history for a conference offered a wide range of questions to address. What connections are there between the history of records and archives, and the archivists' daily work? Is history an after-dinner entertainment at best or does its pursuit contribute real value to archival missions and everyday work? What methods are best suited to the development of a history of records and archives? Who should do this work? What themes do people see in archives history? What has been done? What remains to be done? All of these questions seemed to be relevant to the theme of the conference. As a consequence, the call for papers was framed broadly to direct attention to the diversity of possible theoretical frames and research work. This approach seemed to be the most fruitful for such an inaugural international gathering.<sup>3</sup>

3 The I-CHORA Web site <<http://www.fis.utoronto.ca/research/i-chora/home.html>>, contains much information about the conference, the program, and other conference events. The Web site also hosts a picture gallery. While Web sites can be impersonal things, this site was invaluable.

The organizing committee issued a call in the spring of 2001 for expressions of interest in either attending or presenting work in progress in the general area of the history of records and archives. The call was posted to a number of different discipline- and subject-oriented discussion lists. Although the organizing committee believed that there was considerable interest among archivists, historians, literary scholars, and cultural theorists, we needed more empirical confirmation to begin organizing a conference. Our sense that the time was ripe for such an international gathering was confirmed abundantly. Well over 100 people responded with enthusiasm, interest, and offers of papers. With this assurance, the committee began work on the conference in earnest, developing a call for papers, seeking support from funders, and choosing a venue that could accommodate an international meeting and associated social activities.

The formal call for proposals for papers in the broad area of records and archives history was issued in fall 2002. The call continued the aim of being broadly inclusive to encourage proposals from all countries, and, we hoped, from many disciplines. In January 2003 the organizing committee reviewed over sixty proposals and sorted these into groups that had a thematic unity. We established three areas: the nature of records and documents (eleven papers); the nature of record-keeping (sixteen); and sources, methods, theories, and philosophies for research in the nature of records and record-keeping (seven papers). The first I-CHORA conference was arranged in nine plenary sessions of twenty-nine presentations, twenty-eight of which were submitted for printing as part of the conference proceedings. These sessions were held at the University of Toronto Faculty of Information Studies from 2–4 October 2003.<sup>4</sup> Student presenters received financial bursaries to attend the conference as did some people attending from Canada, the United States, Australia, the

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able for keeping people informed of developments and for posting the program and other key information for those coming from out of town. The Web site was also used for registration. It had many administrative and communication uses and is still very informative. Links were developed to the second conference site, maintained in Amsterdam (<<http://i-chora2.archiefschool.nl/>>) and will have links to the I-CHORA 3 conference to be held 27–29 September 2007 in Boston, MA, USA. It will be hosted by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

- 4 The following papers and presentations were scheduled: Terry Cook, “The Archive is a Foreign Country: Rediscovering Records in History”; Jody Baltessen, “The Construct of ‘Personal’ Space: Transition in Personal Records-keeping Practices”; Ala Rekrut, “Material Literacy: Reading Records as Material Culture”; Diego Navarro Bonilla, “Merchants, Lovers, and Spies: How Private Archives Came unto Daily Life in Modern Europe”; Jane Zhang, “The Lingering of Hand Written Records”; Helen Brown, “Telling a Different Story: A Case Study of the Constructed Characteristics of Locally Generated School Records”; Eliot Wilczek, “Documenting Heroes: Records Creation in the US Army During the Great War”; Sandra Ferguson, “‘A Murmur of Small Voices’: On the Use of the Picture Postcard in Academic Research”; Michael Piggott, “Towards a History of the Australian Diary”; Ping Yao, “Inscribed Lives: Epitaphs in Tang China (618–906)”; Jeannette A. Bastian, “Placing Archives in the Memory Continuum: Remembering the Homestead Strike of 1892”; Berna-

Philippines, and Europe.<sup>5</sup> Following the conference, authors were invited to submit revised and enlarged texts for publication consideration through the normal process of a blind peer review. This issue of *Archivaria* is comprised largely of papers that were first heard at the I-CHORA conference.

The energy and excitement of the conference in its individual plenary sessions cannot be reproduced in the pages of a text; however, a round-table wrap-up session, chaired by Terry Cook, allowed all participants to reflect on the papers they had heard, and to discuss the large themes they saw emerging from the diversity of offerings at the conference. This wrap-up session proved to be very fruitful in exposing more general ideas about the perspectives, theories, and research that would deepen knowledge of the field in the future. Participants were asked to identify what threads, if any, beyond the explicit general interest in the history of records and their keeping, linked the papers to larger archival practices. What were the theoretical and practical connections to current archival issues, and to the pressing problems of practitioners? What avenues seemed most fruitful to continue the explorations of topics, both in individual research, and perhaps collectively, at a future meeting?

Most people at the conference agreed that the history of records was intrin-

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dette Callery, "Form and Function: Punctuated Equilibrium in the Evolution of Museum Record-keeping Systems"; J. Patrick Hughes, "Red Tape and Pigeonholing"; R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, "Court Records in Nineteenth-Century America and the Ottoman Empire: Their Nature and Utility as Sources for Social Analysis"; Peter J. Horsman, "A French Legacy: The Transition from Collegiate to Bureaucratic Record-keeping in the Netherlands (1800–1900)"; Stefano Vatali, "The Archivist and the Architect: Francesco Bonaini and the Foundation of the State Archives of Florence"; Susan Palmer, "Sir John Soane and the Building of the New State Paper Office, 1830–1833"; Elizabeth Yakel, "Dear Diary: The History and Function of Diaries in a Religious Community"; Michelle Light, "Evidence of Sanctity: Record-keeping and the Development of Canonization Processes in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century"; Orietta Fillippini, "The Archives History as the History of the Political System and Knowledge Geography: Carlo Catari (1614–1697), Prefect of the Paper Archives of Castel Sant'Angelo"; Giorgetta Bonfiglio-Dosio, "Padua Municipal Archives from the XIIIth to XXth Centuries: A Case of a Record-keeping System"; Deidre Simmons, "Keepers of the Record: The Hudson's Bay Company and Three Centuries of Records Management"; Shadrak Katuu, "Engaging the Archival Discipline and Indigenous Ways of Knowing"; Eric Ketelaar, "'Control through Communication' in a Comparative Perspective"; Richard Hollinger, "The History of E-mail and its Impact on Records-keeping"; Tom Nesmith, "Reopening Archives"; Randall Jimerson, "Documents and Archives in Early America"; Richard J. Cox, "Lester J. Cappon and the Relationship of History, Archives, and Scholarship in the Golden Age of Archival Theory"; Laura Millar, "The Key of Knowledge: Exploring the Concept of Record-keeping"; Didier Devriese, "Pour une réflexion épistémologique en archivistique"; Mariella Guercio, "Record-keeping Systems: Historical Analysis and Models for Building the Future."

<sup>5</sup> The conference was supported by the Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto, the Archives of Ontario as part of its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, and the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation. This support, along with registration revenue, allowed us to administer the Web site and registration, offer assistance to those in need, print the proceedings for registrants, and provide breakfasts, lunches, and a reception for conference attendees.

sically interesting, worth pursuing for its own sake, and a legitimate area for research and theoretical exploration apart from its ties to the history of organizations, of business and archival practices, and of technologies. Being engaged with the history of records leads naturally into the realm of theoretical speculation and, by analogy, is especially pertinent to understanding the historical situatedness of current examples and practices. Changes are not novel to records making or keeping, and a better understanding of the many types of revolution in information in the past is relevant to the archivist in understanding contemporary matters. Most participants agreed that the potential of many theoretical frameworks for research had not yet been explored in depth and that a considerable amount of basic research into the complex nature of records was needed to provide a foundation of knowledge. Some areas and topics were explored in the conference. At the wrap-up session, participants noted that many larger themes emerged from the specific and unique research that was reported in the conference presentations. Many are represented by the articles that are included in this issue.

The conference was well aware of the burgeoning interest in archives and record-keeping that has been evident in many disciplines over the past decade or so.<sup>6</sup> Scholars from diverse disciplines have been asking, either implicitly or explicitly, some of the same questions that archivists have always asked. What constitutes the records of a person or function? How are these connected to human activities? Are there abiding patterns to be seen in the making and keeping of records? Are certain behaviours repeated? When and why do documentary practices change? What motivates the making, transmitting, and keeping of information artefacts? What purposes did records serve in their contemporary environment? How do records creators and their contemporaries understand their records? What stories do they tell us about the past? And what ways are best suited to retelling these stories to others in the future? We know from everyday experience in archives that many people use historical records for purposes never originally foreseen. Since the past is not fixed in content or in its bounds, but rather constitutes an expanding universe of mean-

<sup>6</sup> The following are some selected examples (this list is not exhaustive): Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, 1995); "The Archive" as two issues of the *History of the Human Sciences* 11/4 (November 1998) and 12/2 (February 1999); Volume 29 (2001) of *Historical Geography* and issue 10 of *Space & Culture* is devoted to the theme of archives; Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Jersey, 2002); and Peter Fritzsche "The Archive" *History & Memory* 17 ½ (Spring/Summer 2005), pp. 15–44. These examples point to a lively interest in the idea, politics, and meaning of archives. As might be expected, the sense of "archives" in such diverse journals and books by specialists in geography, history, and philosophy is not the definition that would be offered by the specialist in archives. The word, its meanings, the formation of the archive, and its political sources and anchors are largely advanced without any recognition of the profession's involvement in the archives. Our conception of archives and archival work are not universally shared by others.

ings and uses, archivists should be fearless explorers of many different literatures, probing the methods of research that are being used, and seeking different modes of acquiring historical understanding and forms of knowledge. For example, anthropological and archaeological methods and techniques, at least by implication if not by direct application, may have considerable utility in understanding and describing many aspects of archives and archival work. Moreover, methods of research that focus on exploring and contextualizing contemporary situations and interactions, especially ethnographic methods of inquiry, might be tailored to suit certain of the archivists' research questions, greatly expanding the range of traditional analytical techniques that archivists use in appraisal.

Material history and material cultures were highlighted as an integral part of records history that had received scant discussion in the past, either in the professional literature or in archival description. This proved to be a potentially rich seam for research and one that clearly had implications for archival practices. Moreover, the fruits of this research should be unapologetically situated at the core of archival interest. The conference exposed an emerging sense of interconnections that are explicit and implicit in any record or system for keeping records – whatever their age and purpose. Materiality, machines, people, presumptions, and multiple layers of culture are part of the essential dimensions of any record – the intellectual challenge is to seek out and identify these intersections and to explore them as part of the process of archival management from appraisal to description to reference.

History of archives is not only about archival ideas, but also about the keeping of records, or archiving, as a larger social practice and an exercise in shaping identity and supporting and reinforcing structures of power. The concrete practices of archives and archivists, formed by education and training in professional schools and diploma programs, more and more seek to comply with standards oriented to technically defined norm and proofs of compliance. Yet the forces driving the retention of some records in archival repositories and the levels of support for these institutions are largely culturally conditioned. The practices, the traditions, and the expectations have foundations that are socially embedded. These foundations are important for the archival practitioner as well as the archival educator to expose, explore, and endeavour to understand. This work is largely accomplished by detailed and extensive research, including, perhaps foremost, scholarly research into the history of records. This leads not just to greater knowledge to feed the processes of description and appraisal, but also to a more profound understanding of the role of records and archives in personal life, as tools and products of business, and as objects and ideas that invite and support cultural contestation.

Another refrain of the conference was the integration of records processes with human activities and affairs. The history of records holds the promise of

providing a better understanding of human experience and human needs. For example, the impetus to inscribe and the instrumentality of inscriptions, and later, the uses of these objects in society and politics, are broad themes for further consideration in research. Large areas of inscripatorial practices have yet to be touched by deep research – from the realm of personal life, through professional motivations and controls, to the situated understanding of procedures and roles for records in organizations over time and in different cultural contexts. Trust and confidence, along with the grounds for belief and the sources of anxiety are social phenomena that shape life and peoples' views about records. These notions will need to be explored by systematic research to locate their current anchors, especially in a time of media proliferation and mass diffusion of information packaged as entertainment, opinion, and story.<sup>7</sup>

Again and again issues of language and definitions cropped up in the conference. How are we to conceive of a record? Can its nature be fully exposed or does that nature change over time and according to circumstances that are key to its life and meaning? The explorations of records histories expose the need for multiple literacies. Materiality, for example, leads us into records and systems as objects and artefacts that manifest technologies, human intentions, and cultural conditioning. The notion of creation emerged at many points in the discussion – when is a record created? How do the uses we have for it impinge on the idea of a point of creation? Is there a moment of creation or are there many moments of re-creation? How should these moments be understood? What kinds of theoretical frameworks lend themselves to a penetrating exploration of the multiple dimensions of records, as history and in history?

Conference attendees returned repeatedly to the notion of the “user” which cropped up in several guises throughout the papers. The notion of “user,” in parallel with the recent focus on the “reader” in book history, seemed to be a surprisingly rich avenue to explore in records and archives – from the idea of contemporary uses and users of historical sources, to the notion of the user as a secondary participant in the record, whose needs and interests can only be satisfied by research into archival records. Their role in situating records in relation to their own world view and in accordance with their needs exposes the location of fissures or breaks in the chain of record making that extend beyond the system and context from which the records originally emerged.

<sup>7</sup> For examples of the type of exploration that are full of promise see Heather MacNeil's *Trusting Records. Legal, Historical and Diplomatic Perspectives* (Dordrecht, 2000) which describes the grounds for trust in law and historical practice, and Laura Millar's probe of the potentially fruitful area of spatial disconnections among the residues of a life and the historical reasons for the separation in “The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Time and Space,” *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002), pp. 1–15.



These fissures were recognized as being important areas for future research because of the potential for such work to inform the processes of appraisal, description, reference, and digital or other type of media conversion.

There was general agreement that engaging in scholarly research developed the maturity and self-awareness of those who work with records – from the point of view of the conference, this was largely archivists. However, the *aperçu* could be extended to embrace others who have interests in records, especially to those who craft structures for information and records systems. A rich understanding of records in their multiple contexts goes beyond the management of processes and functions.

As concrete realizations of contextual analysis, case studies have considerable potential for developing grounded theories and models of records making, especially in a single cultural context. Insights or conclusions derived from the details of one environment or specific historical experience may be usefully applied or tested in another situation that has some obvious parallels, for example, a similar type of organization located in different juridical and cultural situations. Case studies also give form and substance to the chameleon-like nature of cultural affects and effects.

The wrap-up session emphasized at many points the inherent value of asking questions. Asking questions forces us to look beyond the received, the obvious, the given. It also leads us to seek answers through research, emphasizing again and again that research inquiry is a core value for archivists that needs constant and continuing refreshment. Records are objects made by human action and by the interaction of people with others and with themselves. This social reality should motivate wide exploration of the reasons and rules, customs and uses that brought records initially into our world. Moreover, once an archives has assumed responsibility for these objects, their original connections to functions and purposes, and their continuing contextualization through time must be given careful consideration in preservation regimes, description programs, public exhibitions, and in any other form of communication, access, or diffusion. These many connections ground and anchor an understanding of any record's contexts and content. Archivists point the way to these connections. In the many tasks they undertake to reveal and preserve these links they will need to call upon many types of knowledge and ways of knowing – ethnography, organizational knowing, records in history, personal documentary behaviour, memory, and communications are among the areas of research that are involved.

The history of records and the questions it inspires transcend the necessary but limited frames of management supported by measurement: it also directs more attention to abiding human motives – to understand their place in a stream of time – and their constantly renewed need to understand this place in multiple ways, those given by the mind and its rationalities and the body and its senses. These modes of constructing truths are different: archival work,

paradoxically, seems to incorporate each of these modes.<sup>8</sup> The past, its materials and its systems, are embedded in records making and keeping. The formative effects of multiple contexts on proveniencal relationships and documentary practices over time in essence is a special and unique form of history. That history must be explored because it is integral to the nature of archives and to archival practices.

8 Useful discussions of these modes, their possible conflicts, and the ways to seek correctives are suggested by Hugh A. Taylor, in "The Archivist, the Letter, and the Spirit," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 1–16; Barbara L. Craig, "The Archivist as Planner and Poet: Thoughts on the Larger Issues of Appraisal for Acquisition," *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001), pp. 175–83; and Bernadine Dodge, "Across the Great Divide: Archival Discourse and the (Re)presentations of the Past in Late-Modern Society," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002), pp. 16–30.