

# Book Reviews

**Diplomatics. New Uses for an Old Science.** LUCIANA DURANTI. Metuchen, New Jersey: Society of American Archivists and the Association of Canadian Archivists in association with Scarecrow Press, 1998. vii, 183 p. ISBN 0-8108-3528-2.

The English noun “diplomats,” from the Latin *res diplomatica*, is defined by the Oxford dictionary as the critical study of diplomas or official documents. But the Latin phrase also suggests a wider ken, embracing the universe of things which affect and are affected by documents. Although other disciplines such as rhetoric and social anthropology have legitimate interests in documents and documentary practices, diplomatics is the only discipline whose object of interest and method of analysis begins with the document. It is from this base that diplomatics addresses larger realities which surround documents and are integrated with their composition, structure, makeup, and relationships.

This volume examines the concept of diplomatics and explains the method of analysis diplomatists use to attach documents to the world in which they arose. In one sense, diplomatics is a methodical, self-referential, and contained system of analysis which can be applied to documents whatever their source. In another sense, it is theoretical, because it implies models which may be used in addressing the nature of records in modern organizational discourses. In a third sense, it is philosophical in its point of view on the world. Diplomatics suggests an underlying, universal need in organized human behaviour which is manifest in the documents we create and the records we keep. The logic inherent in documentary communications creates a universe of complex relationships, a *res diplomatica*, some of which are clear, obvious, and tangible, but others which are implied, intangible, and illusive. Diplomatics, as a method of analysis for the relationships tied to documents, is important to archivists as theory and as a useful tool. Diplomatic analysis is applicable to virtually all archival functions, from appraisal through description. This volume is an important contribution to our understanding of diplomatics, and additionally it lays out the ground on which the discipline may

expand in the future.

*Diplomatics* originally appeared sequentially in six issues of *Archivaria* (numbers 29 to 33), beginning in the summer of 1989. In this reprint as a monograph, the author provides a new introduction, a brief index to diplomatic terms used in the text, and a contents list that identifies subsections of each chapter. These supplements to the original series are useful guides to novice readers and for future quick reference. The original notes for each chapter and new references for the text of the introduction are placed at the foot of the appropriate page. For this service to readers the press deserves congratulations. Citations at the end of chapters are not universally useful. Extended references to ideas or material surrounding the argument best serve readers when they are immediately available on the same page as the related text.

The author organizes the discussion of diplomatics into six chapters, each with sections which focus on related areas. The table of contents guides the reader to these, and the brief index of diplomatic terms provides a page reference to definitions and their main discussion. The breadth of the argument is best revealed by the chapters and their components. The first chapter is the "Origin, Nature, and Purpose of Diplomatics" which is divided into five sections: why this book; the word diplomatics; the origin and development of the discipline; the object of diplomatics; and the purpose of diplomatics. Chapter two discusses "The Fact, the Act, and the Function of Documents." Next, chapter three reviews the concept of "...Persons and the Public and Private Nature of Documents." Chapter four then explores "The Procedure of Creation of Documents." Chapter five is a full discussion of "The Form of Documents ..." and how these can be analysed critically, and chapter six suggests the "Uses of Diplomatics," especially in the light of current concerns about the nature of records and record-keeping in electronic form. Each chapter is fully noted, clearly presented, and closely argued.

An important original essay is the introduction in which the author explores the development of her thinking on diplomatics over the course of the six issues of *Archivaria*, especially in the context of her teaching responsibilities in the Master of Archival Studies programme at the University of British Columbia. She reflects on the genesis of the series and on her own learning which accompanied the exercise of writing and teaching diplomatic method. The author introduces two new categories of records – supporting and narrative – which she proposes to accommodate those documents which do not have a legal nature. In addition, she explains her adjustments to the concept of annotations and why she proposes to modify physical form to remove the traditional diplomatic interest in the medium of documents. She also reviews the adjustment of diplomatics to embrace aggregations of records and the potential of diplomatic categories to be used as a set of formal elements in designing preservation systems for records in electronic form.

Many readers may not agree with some or all of these extensions or dele-

tions. The larger point, however, is that diplomatics is amenable to change as a living, analytic method for records. Moreover, diplomatic elements are perhaps as worthy of consideration in records design as are any other principles of data and metadata for information retrieval, especially for systems which are expected to keep records and systems which must retain the authenticity of records through time.

This book is the only systematic exposition of diplomatics in English. For this reason alone, it would be indispensable for all archivists whose first language is English. But in addition to providing guided access to concepts and terms in the literature – all in European languages which may not be accessible to English-speaking students and practitioners – the volume extends many diplomatic concepts with suggestions for their continuing role in modern archives. These extensions further refine diplomatics to recognize its potential in the design of record-keeping systems. In both respects – the discussion of concepts and method in the context of their historical development, and the suggestions for new uses as a tool to assist the design of systems without the anchors of paper, registry, and use – the book has much to offer archivists, database designers, historians, sociologists, discourse analysts, and students of rhetorics and communication theory.

It would be churlish to claim that a review does justice to the richness of concepts, ideas, and arguments which are integrated in the volume: the book should be read as a whole. However, having made a disclaimer, I would like to direct your attention to areas in which this book is indispensable to archivists, to archive students and beyond, to any scholar who engages the past through written sources, and to any records professional seeking concepts and definitions to pinpoint the nature of records.

Diplomatics addresses written records with a language for concepts and a method for analysing objects. Diplomatics is, of course, not the only discipline with a method for the analysis of written communications. However, while records and documents may be analysed grammatically, rhetorically, and as integral parts of larger discourses such as cultural anthropology or human-computer interaction, only diplomatics begins with and grounds its analysis in the record as a concrete object with a form and structure as well as unique content. Diplomatic seeks a truth through the analysis of the formal and physical parts of a document using concepts and language which are widely applicable to organizational records. The diplomatic method may be a tool for designing record-keeping systems. Records professionals who participate in the definition of requirements and other related records activities, especially for records in electronic form, will find that diplomatics provides them with a language anchored in concepts. This clarity of expression and completeness in definition allows many diverse groups of records professionals to coalesce around a common understanding. Diplomatic may provide a platform for shared activities, whether these be analysing the remains from the past or

designing records systems for the future.

Whether the diplomatic method of analysis and the diplomatist's language will be useful in engineering current records systems are claims that remain to be proven. It is not alone in providing concepts and tools for building robust systems. Social informatics especially has key observations about the role of people as creators and users of systems in structured environments. Diplomatics, by contrast, does not address the human factor directly, yet, the diplomatic method which links people, records, and procedure are critical to establishing a document's historical credibility and situation. By implication, these elements must be important enough to address during the design phase. However, the way to transform a method of analysis of a historical object to a principle of engineering in organizational record-keeping is neither explicit nor implied in diplomatic methods. This is the area in which new research will retool diplomatics for its use in knowledge engineering.

Diplomatics, like any science, is mute concerning itself: it cannot analyse itself nor can it provide the context in which to understand its own historical development. This volume contributes to the history of diplomatics, especially in chapter one. However, it is only a sketch. Diplomatics, in common with other archival concepts and practices, is part of a large, professional territory which is virtually unexplored either historically or critically in English. For example, a detailed investigation into the intellectual and archival milieu which refined diplomatic method will help archivists, at the very least, better understand how diplomatics might contribute to records work in the future, whether this be in traditional archival functions, such as description and appraisal, or in new areas, such as records engineering.

Flaws in the volume for the most part are related to production and do not compromise the text or its value to the reader. There are a few typographical errors, including missing end brackets and spelling (e.g., a bracket missing on page 45, spelling on pages 57 and 58). The reproduction of the Letters Patent of George III (page 93) is too small to be either legible or useful. The author refers to an appendix which has diplomatic terms and definitions. (e.g., pages 161 and 162). However, there is no appendix; it seems to have been converted at some time during production to an index which lists diplomatic terms with references to their major appearance in the text. Unfortunately, not all instances of the term are indexed. A complete index of all uses of terms would have been a useful addition, especially for novice readers.

It is rare to find in one place so much that is fundamental to the archivist whose professional universe is structured by records and record-keeping and whose work is dedicated to their understanding. It is equally unusual to find in one place a discussion of ideas and concepts which are fundamentally important to other professions – the records manager, the historian, the sociologist, and the knowledge engineer. This book, in bringing the fullness of diplomatic ideas to our attention and in English, is a valuable service to many groups

because diplomatics transcends disciplinary boundaries. This volume deserves to be the cornerstone in the archivist's library, and should have an important place in the working libraries of historians and knowledge engineers. In its economy of thought and clarity of exposition, the volume, at 183 pages, is remarkably slim for a text of method. This book is not a millstone for students but a milestone publication for practitioners, academics, and students of other disciplines with interests in documentary communications. It deserves all of our care and attention and its methods deserve equally to be challenged, extended, and refined through applied research and through analysis of records in history.

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**Managing Electronic Records.** Second edition. WILLIAM SAFFADY. Prairie Village, Kansas: ARMA International, 1998. 196 p. ISBN 0 933887 77 9.

The proliferation of electronic records and rapid change in technology, William Saffady maintains, has necessitated this updated edition of *Managing Electronic Records*. The second edition is intended, as the original was in 1992, for records managers, archivists, computer specialists, and other professionals with responsibility for the management of information in their organizations. Its stated purpose is to provide a comprehensive discussion of records management concepts and their application to electronic records. As Saffady notes, the principal aims of the book are to provide an understanding of management issues associated with electronic records; the physical characteristics of recording media; the principles and procedures of inventorying and scheduling; and an understanding of methods of preservation.

The book begins with an overview of key issues, concerns, and definitions of various types of records and terms. Statistics on the proliferation of computers, electronic records, and Web-related electronic commerce during the late 1990s are provided to support the claim of the growing impact of these technologies. Saffady must be commended for not limiting his definition of electronic records simply to computer-generated data. His vision encompasses records created by audio and video technology as well as scientific instrumentation, foreshadowing the convergence of computer and communications technologies that have become forefront in the computer, cable, information, and entertainment industries.

On the principle that records managers "must be familiar with the physical and functional characteristics of magnetic and optical media to evaluate and recommend schedules," Saffady presents a chapter where he surveys the most important of these media. This section has been substantially modified since