

# Book Reviews

**American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice.** RANDALL C. JIMERSON, ed. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 2000. 657 p. ISBN 0-931828-41-4.

This hefty volume brings together “important recent American writings on archives and the role of archivists in modern society.” It is divided into nine sections: understanding archives and archivists; archival history; selection and documentation; appraisal; arrangement and description; reference and use of archives; preservation; electronic records; and management. As the editor, Randall Jimerson, notes, it is the successor (and certainly a worthy one) to *A Modern Archives Reader* (1984) and comparable to *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (1993). In his introduction, he makes reference to Canadian and European criticisms of American writings, and, by implication, offers this collection as riposte. The American playwright Edward Albee once said, “the act of writing is an act of optimism. You wouldn’t take the trouble to do it if it didn’t matter.” These writers obviously think writing matters, for they are passionate about their ideas and what they mean for practice.

Near the end of his introduction, Jimerson has a few things to say about American attitudes towards the relationship between theory and practice. After asking whether it is parochial to publish a volume containing only American writings, he says it is valuable

for our colleagues in other nations, seeking to understand the peculiarly American tensions between archival theory and practical solutions to daily problems. Americans on the whole will not easily accept theoretical constructs independent of practical applications. Rather than lament Americans’ seeming lack of intellectual rigor or resistance to abstract truths, I think we should celebrate a national inclination toward meeting daily problems directly with a good dose of common sense ... theory devoid of practical applications will stifle us and prevent us from completing our daily

tasks. ... Theory is based on experience. Since the days of Schellenberg, this has been the distinctly American contribution to the world of archives. Theory and practice cannot be separated. They must work together, to ensure the preservation of archival records and the rights and guarantees they protect. This recognition is what defines the American archivist.

In this passage, Jimerson poses several interesting questions. What in fact is the relationship between theory and practice? Is there a distinctive American approach, different from that of other traditions? Do American archivists lack intellectual rigour or resist abstract truths?

There are two possible approaches to the place of theory in a profession like ours: one can take the deductive or the inductive approach. The deductive approach begins with theory and then uses it to develop methods to guide practice. As theory is a systematic set of ideas about something, it goes without saying that such ideas depend upon observation of the phenomenon to be explained. The test of the deductive approach is whether the methods, when applied, lead to successful practice. A lack of success can always be traced back to the theory, which may not have taken into account all the factors that make for success. The inductive approach, on the other hand, begins with observation from which ideas about method emerge to guide practice. In the inductive approach, reasoning to explain the success or failure of methods becomes theory. This reasoning may reveal that the original observations were not correct, broad enough, or in some other way provided a faulty basis for the generalizations implicitly or explicitly part of establishing method. In both approaches, methods, which may always be improved or changed to meet new circumstances, can to be seen as a bridge between theory and practice, or, as one might put it, as working hypotheses. I shall try to situate some of the articles in this collection in this theory-method-practice continuum, and by the by provide some shadings to the stark statements of Jimerson.

First, it is necessary to have a sense of the American context. If we presume, as Jimerson does, that this volume reveals the cast of the American archival mind, a careful first reading of Luke Gilliland-Swetland's article on the Public Archives Tradition (PAT) and the Historical Manuscripts Tradition (HMT) will pay dividends. Where Richard Berner, who coined the terms, saw the two traditions mainly in their approach to arrangement and description of archives, Gilliland-Swetland sees them as two world views.

Defenders of the historical manuscripts tradition perceived themselves as members of a community of humanities scholars and, by extension, as historian-interpreters of the documents they preserved. Advocates of the public archives tradition perceived themselves to be professionals with mastery over a body of specialized theory and practice; consequently they viewed their role as administrator-custodian of the documents they preserved.

He points out that these two professional orientations have clashed at several critical junctures in the history of the profession. But there is more than professional outlook to separate the two traditions. They apply equally well to two strains in American archival development. On the one hand, manuscripts, or private textual archival documents, found their way mainly into historical societies, libraries (including the influential Library of Congress), and museums. On the other hand, the majority of public archival institutions, including the influential U.S. National Archives, acquired only public records. The remarkable grassroots interest in the American past spawned a feverish rescue of the manuscript remains of the past long before the establishment of public archives – the U.S. National Archives, for instance, not arriving on the scene until 1934. Under the influence of the Library of Congress, practice in the HMT fused archival and library concepts and principles. Under the influence of that remarkable first generation of archivists at the U.S. National Archives, practice in the PAT gave traditional European concepts and methods a modern American cast. The two are by no means solitudes, but they continue to this day to march in some respects to different drummers, as some of the articles in this collection underscore. The writers also continue a longstanding effort, sometimes unwittingly, to reconcile practices in the HMT and PAT. It is interesting to reflect on where the various articles are situated in these two traditions, and whether they aim at the reconciliation that Gilliland-Swetland himself favours.

Several of the articles are avowedly theoretical. In three (“On the Idea of Uniqueness,” “On the Idea of Permanence,” and “The Symbolic Significance of Archives”), James O’Toole takes up Frank Burke’s call to ponder fundamental issues. In the first of these (all superbly written), he explores the various colours given to the concept of uniqueness in (mostly American) archival literature and the way in which technology has changed the way we think of uniqueness. It is well worth reading for his distinction of the four different ways writers have employed the concept of uniqueness, which he says is “a complicated and relative idea,” insufficiently endowed with nuance in the literature. He is more or less correct, but neither his notion of uniqueness of processes and functions nor of aggregations of records quite catches the nuance of the concept in traditional theory. In a certain way, uniqueness has always been a relative concept, not an absolute one. An archival document is unique in the sense determined by its relationship with other documents created in the course of the same activity; it is unique relative to the circumstances of creation. The same document can exist in two separate places in a fonds or in two separate fonds and be unique in each case. Think, for instance, of the letter sent and the copy of it kept in two separate fonds. This is probably the one article in the whole collection that wrestles with a single, fundamental archival idea for its own sake, even though, in deference to that practical bent Jimerson mentions, the author feels obliged at the end to draw some implications for

practice from his exegesis. He follows the same pattern in his exploration of the idea of permanence, which he concludes has passed from being thought of as an absolute value to a “relative notion of little clarity.” It might be noted that he subjects the thinking – for instance, about intrinsic value – of his fellow archivists to some rigorous examination.

In his other article, O’Toole asks where archives come from and why. He has no quarrel with traditional ideas about the utilitarian origins of most records, but explores cases where they have served symbolic and ceremonial purposes. He believes that understanding the symbolic and ceremonial roles records played should inform appraisal, for, if not, it “will necessarily be flawed.” As he points out, “examining these questions can offer archivists a fuller sense of context, and ultimately of meaning, of the materials in their care.” Essentially, he works deductively to establish ideas about symbolic significance (using observations of many of the authors he quotes) to suggest implications for the method of appraisal. It is interesting that he feels obliged to defend himself against what he calls the “waspish anti-intellectualism” of fellow American theory deniers. In the end, he says, “to understand records, archivists must understand as much as possible about the circumstances that produced them.” This is a very traditional idea but one which archivists seem often to discover for themselves as if it were new. Still, it is refreshing to see O’Toole demonstrate that context is a part of the record necessary for its understanding in archival terms.

A geographer, Kenneth Foote (“To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture”), also wishes to explore the theoretical dimensions of the question of why societies maintain archives. He posits that archives can be seen as a “means of extending the temporal and spatial range of human communications,” and a source of collective memory. He also wishes to stress the interdependence of the cultural role of archives with that of “other institutions and traditions.” He then explores a number of cases where remembering and forgetting have played an important part in constructing social memory. He comes to a conclusion that would warm the heart of any postmodernist when he suggests that “the power of social pressure” that has shaped society’s view of the social landscape acts similarly to shape archival collections. “Theorists,” he says, “must eventually come to terms with how archives, as communications resources, are to be related to other means of memory conservation, and why some events are so well documented and stir so much interest while others leave such a small mark on the historical record, to the point where archives become a memory of last resort.” Articles such as this one stimulate thinking about how the archival endeavour fits into the much larger tapestry of remembering, forgetting, honouring, and learning about and from the past. It is an area of inquiry to which archivists themselves rarely contribute.

A third author, Judith Panitch, who examines the treatment of records from the ancien regime during the French Revolution, also explores the kinds of

social pressures that form the documentary heritage. Her reflections lead her to the conclusion that “neither atemporal nor absolute, the meaning [archives] convey may be manipulated, misinterpreted, or suppressed.” Of course, hers is an article in the history of archives, but, like O’Toole on symbolic significance and Foote on collective memory, she is concerned to fertilize ideas about archives with what might be called a cultural historical perspective. All three wrestle with the question of how society makes meaning from its archives. In that sense, they fall nicely into the interpretive role upheld by proponents of the HMT. One way or another, they raise an unsettling question for the archivists. How do archival theory, method, and practice address the question of the archivist as agent of collective memory making? It is surprising that a profession built on the kind of understanding of context O’Toole advocates has been so insensitive to the influences of its own context, although this is changing, as several of these articles show.

Continuing the contextual theme, Elisabeth Kaplan and Jeffrey Mifflin (“‘Mind and Sight’: Visual Literacy and the Archivist”) make a strong case for greater understanding of the context of creation of visual records. As they note, much of the archival and library literature on visual materials dwells on the physical and practical aspects of care and provision of access. They are interested in “underlying intellectual issues.” They therefore explore insights from thinking about the concept of visual literacy and the application those insights have for archival treatment of visual records. Essentially, they promote several well-known principles of archival science, but ones all too rarely applied in the treatment of visual materials. Theirs is an example of an article written for the peculiar American context in which archival materials are frequently preserved in a library context, often with faint understanding of archival concepts. It might be noted that this is the only article to dwell specifically on the nature and archival treatment of non-textual archives. (An article on preservation re-recording of audio recordings is the other.)

The division of articles, ostensibly on the same subject, into the two sections “Selection and Documentation” and “Appraisal” is mystifying. The former is supposedly about acquisition policy and strategy, while the latter is about appraisal. As one of the authors in the section on selection and documentation, Tim Ericson, says, “while appraisal theory has developed over the years, ideas regarding acquisition policy have lagged behind.” This section also contains articles by Helen Samuels and Richard Cox on documentation strategy. Samuels’s “Who Controls the Past?” placed documentation strategy firmly in the context of “collecting” institutions in the HMT, even if it is true that she came eventually to apply her ideas to selection of records of an organization in her book on university records, *Varsity Letters*. In his article on documentation strategy and archival appraisal principles, Cox speaks, at least implicitly, as if there were no difference between appraisal in the HMT and the PAT. His discussion of twelve principles of appraisal (they are really a

mixture of maxim and proposition) makes no allowance for institutional context. Institutions in both the HMT and PAT need appraisal policies, criteria, strategies, and procedures. These are matters of method, which is the concern of the articles in the section on appraisal by Frank Boles and Julia Young and by Mark Greene. Boles and Young examine appraisal of university records, and Greene looks at appraisal in the context of the acquisition of private archives (non-public records) by the Minnesota Historical Society.

Boles and Young try to incorporate all facets of the analysis conducted during appraisal into their methodological framework. It includes analysis of the records' context, content, and use. They also incorporate feasibility analysis (cost of retention) and consideration of the impact of (or reaction to) the appraisal decision on the creating body and on user clientele. While one might agree with all of their ideas, Boles and Young do face up to the challenge to see appraisal as a socially influenced exercise and therefore try to incorporate all the relevant considerations into their methodology. By contrast, Greene argues for a utilitarian theory or philosophy based on analysis of research use of archives as the "principal appraisal criteria," considered in the context of the repository's mission and resources. Beneath the surface in all the articles on appraisal and acquisition one can see the inductive approach at work. All the authors make observations (or borrow those of other authors) about how appraisal has been conducted and what its results have been. They then make propositions about how it could be better conducted (how method could be improved) and speculate about the results. This seems to me to be the strong American predilection, but I doubt that it is very different anywhere else in the world. We have yet to see a fully formed theory of appraisal approached from the deductive perspective, but the vast outpouring of articles about appraisal, in which American writing has been the most prominent, has gone a long way to lay the foundations for a synthesis of ideas about appraisal.

Another area of inquiry even more dominated by American writings is reference and use of archives. This volume reprints Elsie Freeman Finch's provocative article from 1984 (it came too late for inclusion in *A Modern Archives Reader*) arguing for a client-centred approach to archives administration. Others have picked up her gauntlet to advocate user studies as the empirical basis for development of more effective practice. There is little doubt that this trend in the American literature reflects the close association of library and archival education, and particularly in practice in repositories in the HMT. The articles on reference and use make good companions with those on arrangement (which Americans see as a means to the end of description and user access) and description, including David Bearman and Richard Lytle's "Power of the Principle of Provenance," Margaret Hedstrom on description of electronic records, and Daniel Pitti on Encoded Archival Description (EAD).

Americans have also written extensively about electronic records, as might be expected from the home of IBM, Microsoft, and the Internet. Bearman and

Hedstrom team up to advocate reinventing archives for the digital age, and Linda Henry weighs in to assert the virtues of traditional ideas. Anne Gilliland-Swetland looks at the possibilities of extending accessibility in the digital age. We will be struggling with the implications of the digital world on archives and our work for a long time. These three articles give the flavour of relatively early reactions to the changing landscape of technology and its effect on archival work.

What then of the questions Jimerson prompts us to ask? First, a great many of the writers give due prominence to considerations of theory, which indeed they do not separate from practice (for that would be ridiculous in an applied discipline), but most of the discourse in this book is rooted firmly in consideration of method and how to improve it: the need for improvement arises from ordinary observation and thinking about the effectiveness, results, and impact of practice. It is hard to avoid concluding that archivists in the United States reflect the pragmatism permeating their society. It is not an unattractive way of operating. When O'Toole tilts at absolutes or Finch and Greene muse about how things can be made better for those who use archives, they are expressing just that sentiment for practicality and utility animating American society in general. These things are bred in the bone. But there is another side to it. There has been something of a sea change in American writing since the publication of *A Modern Archives Reader* seventeen years ago. The deductive spirit intrudes in many of these articles when the authors consider, however briefly, the nature of the things they are dealing with and the ideas that animate method. It is impossible to do that without indulging in abstract thought. American archivists have always concerned themselves with the concepts and principles that provide the foundation of practice, but that interest has deepened and broadened in remarkable ways in the last twenty years, something this volume makes quite evident. Jimerson and his colleagues do well to celebrate their intellectual achievement. It neither lacks rigour nor resists the quest for abstract understanding, however much it is rooted in the American tradition of pragmatism, on the one hand, and the course of archival development, on the other.

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**Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa**, 2d ed. VERNE HARRIS. Pretoria: National Archives of South Africa, 2000). 152 p. ISBN 0-7970-3876-0.

In 1997, *Archivaria* published Verne Harris's article "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South