

Personal Archives

The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals

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RÉSUMÉ Cet article se penche sur le caractère des archives personnelles. L'auteure constate que les récents débats concernant l'évaluation et l'acquisition des documents ont été centrés sur le modèle des documents gouvernementaux ou administratifs et que des débats similaires n'ont pas encore eu lieu pour ce qui est des documents personnels. En adoptant les stratégies organisationnelles de la théorie archivistique actuelle pour les archives personnelles, les archivistes peuvent révéler les individus au point de rencontre de leurs interactions ainsi qu'en tant qu'acteurs dans divers rôles à l'intérieur de la société. Cependant, dans les fonds d'archives personnelles, tant les uniques schémas documentaires des individus que les expressions de leurs caractères individuels et de leurs luttes intérieures révèlent comment les archives personnelles diffèrent des documents institutionnels. En cherchant à refléter le caractère et l'intériorité des individus dans leurs archives, les archivistes peuvent représenter de meilleure façon leur créateur non pas uniquement comme un agent social, mais comme un individu créatif forgeant sa propre vie au cours des ans.

ABSTRACT This article examines the character of personal archives and suggests that recent debates concerning the acquisition and appraisal of records have centred on administrative or government records models, and that similar debates have not occurred concerning personal records. By adopting the organization-based strategies of current archival theory to personal archives, archivists will reflect on individuals at the crux of interactions and as performing various roles within society. In the personal fonds, however, both the unique documentary patterns of individuals and the expressions of an individual's character and interior struggles reflect how individuals' archives differ from organizational records. By seeking to reflect the character and interiority of individuals within archives, archivists will better represent the creator not just as a social agent, but as the creative individual forging his or her own life through time.

Personal fonds contain the documentation of individual lives and human personality. While these fonds certainly often reflect the recorded evidence of the functions of the creator, in the same way as do fonds of organizations, personal archives also contain traces of the individual character of the record's creator. There are here glimpses of the inner soul as well as its outer manifestation in public activities. My work with the Literary Manuscript Collection at

the National Library has involved working exclusively with fonds from poets, novelists, and playwrights, as well as organizations and individuals relating to literature such as translators and small presses. In doing this work, I have sensed some silences concerning personal archives in mainstream archival theory. Most such theory has been articulated by writers working for or experienced in national and, more recently, other institutional archives, where the emphasis is on the corporate and collective, as opposed to the individual and idiosyncratic. While there may be good reasons for this, I believe that archival theory needs to be elaborated with more nuance for personal archives. Indeed, there is a need to put a consideration of the “personal” back in the personal archive.

The administrative or government focus of much archival thinking has been especially evident in recent debates about records appraisal and records acquisition. Personal archives require a different appraisal approach than do administrative or government records. A starting point for this new treatment could concern how we conceptualize the records and how we approach them during the acquisition process. What then makes personal archives different from other types of fonds? What kinds of human experiences are recorded? Certainly, one critically important aspect of personal archives is documenting the activities of individuals, but in personal archives, what is also recorded is the personal, the idiosyncratic, the singular views of people as they go about doing the things that they do and commenting on them. Personal archives, then, are not only about transactions of “official” personal business and formal activity, but are also a most prevalent source of commentary on daily and personal life and relationships, almost by their very nature. Broadly put, the fonds of an individual is a site where personality and the events of life interact in documentary form. Certainly, as Michel Foucault and other post-structuralist critics would argue, the individual in his/her private words and personal musings often reflects, usually subconsciously, various public mores or societal norms. While these personal reflections thus become useful sources for grasping these larger sociological perspectives, it is the personal filters themselves that reveal the inner character of the records creator. Here we have the psychology of archives more than their transactionality.

Personal archives contain the personal view of life’s experiences; they represent a departure from the collective formality and systemic organization found in other types of records. There is an intimacy in the personal archive not present in the collective, corporate, formalized record-keeping system. These intimate elements are reflected not only in the content and organization of personal records, but come into play in the archivist’s direct interaction with the creator/donor during appraisal, acquisition, and subsequent management of personal archives. In the case of authors’ fonds, the experiences recorded in the archival material include not just the acts and facts about the author’s activities, but also her or his views, opinions, prejudices, and emo-

tional reactions concerning literary tours, teaching, publishing, jury work, review work, and the whole experience of writing itself. A literary fonds accrued over time reveals the painful amount of work which goes into making really good literature, but equally uncovers much about the evolving personality and character traits of the author.

So, viewing personal records as documentation of individual character (as well as of transactional functionality) brings a formal disjunction with archival appraisal theory as it has usually been articulated. As noted, most recent appraisal theory does not address personal records, since historically this theory – and the appraisal activity generally in archives – has been built on the models of organizational or government records – even since the days of T.R. Schellenberg and Margaret Cross Norton, who first articulated appraisal ideals for the North American profession a half century ago. That institutional focus has only grown since. Huge volumes of modern bureaucratic paper records, the impersonal and systemic nature of organizational culture, archivists' links with the formal file classification and the business efficiency agenda of the records management profession, and now justified widespread concern for capturing "records" in corporate computer-dominated environments – all these have set the agenda for most modern thinking about appraisal: as theory, as strategy, and as methodology. This is well and good – for that environment. But personal record-creating environments and personal records creators do not share all these factors with their institutional equivalents, some not at all and some only to a much less significant degree of complexity or implication. Simply put, private documents are far different from the government or administrative records that underpin many appraisal models. Personal records thus require different concepts and different treatments by the archivist, primarily because such records are acquired from individuals, not corporate entities, and document the lives and personalities of individuals, not just their transactional or public activities. Personal archives reflect not only what a person does or thinks, but who they are, how they envision and experience their lives. An individual creates records to serve his or her needs or predilections or personality, not because some law, statute, regulation, or corporate policy says so. Of course, there are exceptions, like personal income tax forms and so on, but these records reflect the individual's public persona and official interactions, not his or her inner soul and private personality. Transactional value is therefore certainly present in personal fonds, but it is only one type of value, usually found when the individual interacts with an organization or professional for a business or government purpose.

It should be recognized here that some recent archival appraisal theorists on the "government side" do try to focus significantly on the individual citizen. The macro-appraisal approach of Terry Cook, for example, which has been implemented for appraising government records at the National Archives of Canada and elsewhere, "emphasizes the dialogue and interaction of citizens

and groups with the state as much as the state's own policies and procedures; ... searches for multiple narratives and hot spots of contested discourse between citizen and state, rather than accepting the official policy line; and deliberately seeks to give voice to the marginalized, to the 'Other,' to losers as well as winners, to the disadvantaged and underprivileged as well as the powerful and articulate ... so that the archives then can acquire in its holdings multiple voices, and not by default only the voices of the powerful."¹ Cook also combines this approach with the astute observation that personal archives would be better served by documentation strategy as a means to complement and supplement the public-sector archives that result from macro-appraisal. This is true, yet Cook's macro-appraisal approach to the citizen-state interaction still places the "citizen" in his or her public transactional focus. While this is certainly worth capturing in archives to fill some past silences, it does not address the personal, private, inner life of the "citizen" as individual personality.

Does one simply see a personal document as a piece of documentation created at the point of interaction between two individuals or between an individual and an organization?² In fact, working with the archives of individuals reminds us not just of the way that the individual fits into society, but the way in which many individuals work and construct their vision of their world in many ways on their own or for a major part in solitude (i.e., the record-creating context is "by themselves," not as part of some formal record-keeping process, life cycle, or continuum). Some archival writers have focussed on documentary forms or various genres of writing (e.g., diaries) and the rules about these,³ rather than exploring other more tenuous aspects: issues of choice, forgery, fiction, self-projection, and personal memorializing often part of the documentation of individuals. Individuals do not sit down to write let-

1 Terry Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), pp. 30–31. For the key concepts and strategies, see Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," in *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, Barbara L. Craig, ed. (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 38–70; and Terry Cook, "'Many are called but few are chosen': Appraisal Guidelines for Sampling and Selecting Case Files," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 25–50.

2 This is a tendency which Australian archivist Adrian Cunningham has called "viewing records in purely transactional terms," and he notes a willingness among theoreticians to shy away from the non-organizational material. To quote Cunningham, "A consensus appears to have emerged which defines a record in transactional terms. This counterproductively narrow concept of the record is to me symptomatic of the corporate myopia afflicting many of today's archival theoreticians. It skirts the slippery concept of the evidential nature of records and excludes such non-organisational material as personal diaries and literary drafts, the recordness which to me is defined by their evidential value." "Beyond the Pale," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24 (May 1996), p. 22.

3 See, for example, the explications of diplomatics by Luciana Duranti well known to Canadian archivists in *Archivaria* 28 to 33, or more directly for personal archives, see Sue McKemmish, "Evidence of Me," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24 (May 1996), pp. 28–45.

ters or manuscripts with other people present: the dialogue or monologue (allowing for the letter or manuscript to be created) is taking place inside that individual's head and is created within the context of the individual's imagination. If we focus on preserving the outer transactional context of records, we seem to be valuing things only for their immediate use in that context or public relevance – i.e., as evidence of the activity or purpose for which, on the surface at least, it was created. Must “evidence of me” always be interpreted as “evidence of me interacting with persons and institutions in the conduct of affairs?” Must the models for government and corporate record-keeping, such as focussing on functional transactions, life cycles, and continuums always been transposed, by implication anyway, to personal archiving?⁴

The transactional context of the record, while important, does not allow for enough latitude for understanding and then valuing personal fonds, simply because people in their private lives are not programmatic or entirely planned or rule-driven or procedure-bound as they make their documents. What, for example, might we say of the jottings of writers? Not all of these mnemonic tokens lead directly to a fruitful storyline or a finished work, yet they do give a taste for the writers' habit of mind and powers of observation. They also serve as symbolic tokens for the writers' drive to continue writing, to keep noting down events for some eventual use. Jottings also provide evidence for the fact that a work of fiction or poetry does not come fully formed to the page and that many works are in constant editing and re-editing. Many written works originate from such “mere scribbles,” but these documents themselves do not mark any transaction or exchange with anyone. The context of the document's creation is “an individual by himself/herself.” These notes are stand-ins for a process and a way of living in the world, written for no one, and are tools created by the writer to spur on his or her own work. And yet, in a documentary context, I have heard of archivists weeding out these notes as un-archival. What can be said about writers' jottings and notes could also be said about diaries, journals, trip accounts, spiritual note-making, reminder lists, even

4 Verne Harris has suggested that Sue McKemmish, in “Evidence of Me,” makes just that mistake – searching for ways in which the Australian records continuum model, developed for institutional record-keeping, might be relevant for personal archives, for looking for “evidence of me.” See his “On the Back of a Tiger: Deconstructive Possibilities in ‘Evidence of Me,’” *Archives and Manuscripts* 29 (May 2001), pp. 8–22. Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward have replied in “In Search of the Lost Tiger, by Way of Sainte-Beuve: Re-constructing the Possibilities in ‘Evidence of Me,’” *Archives and Manuscripts* 29 (May 2001), pp. 23–43. For a similar critique of such transactions-focussed and evidence-centred approaches to archives, see Terry Cook, “Beyond the Screen: The Records Continuum and Archival Cultural Heritage,” in *Beyond the Screen: Capturing Corporate and Social Memory*, Lucy Burrows, ed. (Melbourne, 2000), pp. 8–21; and Terry Cook, “The Impact of David Bearman on Modern Archival Thinking: An Essay of Personal Reflection and Critique,” *Archives and Museum Informatics* 11, no. 1 (1997), pp. 15–37.

some photography albums created for personal use only to stimulate memory and reflection.

Archival theory has not yet grasped the significance of what might be called the flotsam of the individual life. Perhaps this is an area that needs to be added to our thinking of what truly makes up a “total archives.” In many ways, personal documents may be seen to eclipse both evidential and informational value by their narrative value: they are in many senses creations of the self and participate in a process of storytelling and de facto autobiography – of the self presenting or representing the self.⁵ Emotion and psychology and individual history push the creator to describe himself/herself or other people in certain ways and to leave out certain other details. Personal archives reflect the character of life upon which there can be no fixed point of judgement. Given this view, it is difficult to treat even personal letters as simply the records of an interaction between individuals or as an exchange of ideas in documentary form. They can also be seen as a cumulative venture of different storytellers. They have rhetorical and syntactical elements of importance, and their tone is certainly a part of their value as well.

In Australian archivist Sue McKemmish’s article “Evidence of Me,” she terms personal archives as the “ongoing story about the self” or the “narrative of the self.”⁶ I would support McKemmish’s contention that to write is to witness. And such witnessing provides “evidence.” But I would contend further that this witnessing is conflated with various other documentary or narrative actions. Personal writing provides not only evidence of “me,” but is simultaneously the ground for playing at self-representation, self-aggrandizement, self-memorialization. There is a creativity and volatility in these documents. By writing, the individual donor does not only provide “evidence of me” and, therefore, all writers collectively, “evidence of us,” as McKemmish contends, but also leads us into the tangle of what it is to enact a human life through time. The focus which McKemmish places on public or formal roles of the individual and the intervention of that individual in relationships with others emphasizes the contextual or functional facet of personhood. By acting to preserve this facet through documentation, we are privileging evidence of the public and interactive side of a personality. But what of these other, inner, more intimate aspects of human character? Should evidence of this story also be preserved?

People are people because of looking out and enacting their characters through their actions (and documentary actions) and through how they present themselves to themselves and to others, but the creation of the individual life is also the struggle with the self, with seeking consistency and meaning in a life

5 Letters offer what Maryanne Dever has called “discrete instances of self-representation.” See her “Reading Other People’s Mail,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 24 (May 1996), p. 120.

6 McKemmish, “Evidence of Me,” p. 31.

sometimes chaotic and idiosyncratic. Certain viewpoints, relationships, and activities therefore get filtered out, suppressed, marginalized, or, conversely, highlighted, made central, part of the meaningful narrative of self-definition that human psychology demands of the self. There is a tension in the writing of private documents between controlled “public” action and the unconscious seeping of the “inner” personality onto the page. It is through a long acquaintance with the records that these sometimes faint traces are more familiar to a reader and that the characteristic habits of mind and rationales become palpable strains of the individual’s self-narrative.⁷ The wealth in the personal record has much to do with the ambiguity of its purpose and intention. In my view, the personal record should not be treated as if it contained only straightforward evidence, but as the site of multiple constructs – of a person upholding and struggling with ideas, of self and of others, while simultaneously contradicting, convincing, and contriving. Within the context of this fluidity of personality, we are not quite finding “evidence of me” but rather of the essential moving target of human life being enacted. It is as if we were changing from viewing the donor as a witness in court through their records, to hearing them in less formal conversation or as a patient on the psychiatrist’s couch.

An archivist dealing with personal fonds is often confronted with the power of the individual personality, for the creator/author is often the actual donor as well – or else a closely related family member. This is radically different from institutional or government archives. There, the archivist interacts with individuals – whether in line operations or records management areas – not because of who they personally are, but because of the legal, official position they occupy. Individual records managers may change frequently in a government department, but the archivist still interacts with the “position” of “records manager” as a corporate person.

This is radically different for personal archives. There are not numerous individuals fulfilling the “position” of Margaret Atwood or Michael Ondaatje. There is only one. And he or she is not transferring records to the archives created by anonymous bureaucrats also ever-changing in their “positions,” and as part of the corporate record-keeping disposal regime, but is personally transferring his or her own records as part of his or her very own life. The archivists doing selection, arrangement, and description of such personal archives have the closest to an all-seeing view of the individual’s documentary output. It is natural for the archivist to feel a personal connection or to develop a personal and often empathetic opinion of the donor (a phenomenon well known to many biographers). For example, a strong sense of personality and character is evoked when working with authors’ archival material, and this factor may well

7 It may be that, in dealing with poets and fiction writers, I see this tension between intention and the unintentional/revision and spontaneous expression in a more extreme way, since these creators create with a conscious mind to creating.

influence the archivist's descriptions, which in turn may draw many researchers and exhibition attendees. This is especially present during acquisition negotiations. Many individual donors have a deep emotional investment in their records, and for them the donation is usually a highly personal and emotional transaction over which some are inclined to feel a certain level of *post partum* anxiety. From these discussions and interactions with the donor, the sensitive archivist can glimpse the nuances of personality that may be present as well in the records. The archivist needs to respond appropriately to the emotion which surrounds importing to the archives the records of someone's life. In a way, it is exporting their own life.

In the case of writers, these are people for whom the pen is a powerful tool and for whom writing things down has conscious or even additional ramifications. Writers, debatably more than others (politicians, social activists, etc.), are aware of selecting their expressions, consciously fictionalizing lives, creating a persona, playing powerfully with language and structure. Personal records show not simply the facts, but the opinions, and rationalizations and romanticizations, about love affairs, parenting, travel, work, and all other aspects of individuals' inner lives. For writers, life details and personal experience become the background to writing and are not neatly separated from the work. Writers are never entirely away from their work and their life details often thread into their work in unsuspected ways. For my part, I have been shocked and awed by what I have read when arranging and describing collections: both the intensity of life as a writer and the economic details of that life are played out against the backdrop of a small literary community and of the frailty of the human ego. In a certain instance, I remember being startled by reading an unpublished poem by a male poet which expressed intense sexual love. Though this is admittedly not one of his better poems, the male perspective on sexual love certainly casts light on the donor's personal life and on male sexuality generally. The poem itself will probably remain unpublished because the poet did not perhaps attain the distance or perspective needed to craft a good poem. The fact that this manuscript remains with the collection provides not only a glimpse to the intense passion which this individual held for another, and the personal details of this attraction, but also the humanizing aspect which personal archives hold above all.

In actual fact, researchers using personal archives may not be looking for evidence of actions or facts in an historical sense, as these may be well known, but more for a sense of feelings, of relationships, and of character. This points to a potential rethinking of the use of archives: archivists should not think that all of their archival materials will be used to indicate facts, dates, roles, and functional contexts to historians. There is a place for novelists, poets, and creative writing teachers to use archives to seek out evidence of character as well as the human storytelling and self-narratives with which we all fill our lives. Archivists therefore should be looking to collect with a broader view of the

potential value of records in the evocation of the character of the writer and that of the individuals surrounding him or her.

The Louis Dudek fonds survives not just to remind us of the clear hand he had in helping many of Canada's 1960s and 1970s poets come to the fore and in developing his own work, but also to reveal to us the heady opinions which he presented both in his published articles and reviews, and in his marginal jottings. These are the straightforward, unflinchingly honest, aesthetic opinions of a writer in the modernist tradition who took his lead from poets like Ezra Pound. The importance of these "facts"/facets are culturally twofold: understanding or feeling the character of the writer per se and as an essential part in the understanding of his/her published contributions. It is this capturing of attitude and character which should have a significant role in appraisal criteria rather than only finding evidence of an individual's cultural output. Perhaps if in archives "concentration of information" is used as a positive indicator of the value of corporate records, then "expression of character" could be an indicator of value for personal archives. How to capture "personality" is the key. It is one thing to say that an individual is important by virtue of his or her accomplishments and accolades; it is another to reflect the character which led her or him to be driven to make the choices she or he did. From these senses of what the personal document may mean and a sense of the importance of documenting the human character, I would hope that as archivists we will select records from a myriad of ideas about what they might document about private character as much as public activities, and that as a profession we will move to expand our appraisal criteria accordingly.

Most private sector archivists wishing to move beyond the passive and ad hoc approaches to appraisal and acquisition adopt some version of the documentation strategy. Helen Samuels, who first enunciated this approach to collecting based on sound conceptualization of acquisition goals, said archivists must try to create in the archives "a representative record"⁸ for their jurisdiction or mandate. If the laudable intention of representativeness is not just to capture documentation of activities and accomplishments but also to account for character and personality, this should become part of the debate on selection.

In dealing with a collection area such as documenting Canadian literature, archivists try to find those records which mirror the personal interrelationships which exist, in addition to documenting the writer's work alone. By adopting techniques of mapping from the documentation strategy, we define our archival universe, basing it roughly on a vision of the life cycle of the published document on the one hand (i.e., where does it come from and where does it go) and, on the other hand, on the working relationships of writers with agents, with universities, with publishers, and so on. In this approach, the doc-

8 Helen Samuels, "Improving our Disposition: Documentation Strategy," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), p. 134.

umentation strategy is used to create a vision of a (sometimes virtual) community or of a series of overlapping communities as the map of our collecting universe. Part of this research-based mapping is to determine how these various communities view themselves and what impact they have on the individual (by comprehending the individual's level of involvement, the tone of relationships, and other qualitative factors). This research opens up the matrix of relationships in which the individual operates, but no more.

For the aim is not just to map a collecting universe for personal fonds based on big names or stellar achievements, but one based on human phenomena and on the threads of influence in various spheres of that universe. Often people are not influential because of their position in the matrix, but because of their ability and force (or quirks) of personality to do certain things and to hold certain views; this results in them taking certain actions or in building certain relationships and networks, which in turn have their own influences. Of course, writers also go in and out of favour with particular audiences. In the case of the literary culture, one has to revise one's collecting vision constantly and also maintain a healthy scepticism about trends (a strategy which is equally relevant to the spheres of politics and social leadership, for example). The archivist also has a research edge: by acquiring, arranging, and describing records, we may also determine who is talking to whom from within our own holdings, in order to identify the less tangible and potentially more current threads of influence and impact than are available through published sources.

Our acquisition priorities for literary fonds must note the changing tide of the literary sea, and the resulting appraisal criteria and collecting policy must reflect this. The appraisal criteria which suit literary manuscript collections include many of those articulated for all archival records: their provenancial contextuality, their completeness, possible user demand, how the material fits with other fonds in the repository, evidential or informational value, and so on. For literary archives, the symbolic or aesthetic value of records are a high priority, as for any kind of cultural records, and these amorphously defined appraisal criteria constitute one of the most important values for many personal fonds.⁹ Decisions based on cultural value are also much more prevalent for archives of individuals and, in a certain sense, these are inevitable in relation to personal fonds, for individual character, personality, intimacy of all sorts, belief, psychology, spirituality – these are all “cultural” in the sense of reflecting human cultures. How well do our archives reflect these values? Perhaps in future, we need to think more of an archives of character than of achievement, more of documenting our complex inner humanity than our surface activities. In this way, thinking anew about personal fonds may bring important insights to broaden archival thinking generally.

⁹ For a discussion, see James O'Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993), pp. 234–55.