

The Appraisal of Personal Papers: A Critical Literature Review

RIVA A. POLLARD

RÉSUMÉ Cet article relève l'absence remarquable des documents personnels au sein des modèles dominants d'évaluation archivistique, que ce soit par le passé ou maintenant, de même que l'insuffisance de la littérature actuelle à traiter des problèmes qui se retrouvent au coeur de l'évaluation des documents personnels. L'auteur suggère que les méthodologies d'évaluation qui se concentrent sur le contexte social entourant les documents d'archives ainsi que sur les fonctions et motivations de leurs créateurs pourraient contribuer grandement à une analyse plus approfondie de ce secteur négligé de la théorie archivistique.

ABSTRACT This article examines the notable absence of personal papers from dominant appraisal models, both historically and at present, as well as the inadequacies of our current literature in addressing issues central to the appraisal of personal papers. It then suggests that appraisal methodologies which focus on the societal context of records and the functions and motivations of their creators may have valuable contributions to make in the further consideration of this much neglected area of archival theory.

Personal papers, those materials within archives and manuscript repositories defined as “the private documents accumulated by or belonging to an individual,” constitute a vital portion of the documentary record.¹ In their *Guide to Donating Your Personal or Family Papers to a Repository*, the Society of American Archivists lists many types of materials – letters, memoirs and reminiscences, diaries, scrapbooks and photograph albums, professional papers, genealogical information, speeches and lectures, labeled photographs and labeled films, video and audio tapes – which fall within the realm of personal papers, and which, they state, provide “essential clues to the past.”² All of these materials, the *Guide* tells readers, “give vital and unique information regarding your life of the history of your family” and “may be important to

1 Lewis J. Bellardo and Lynn Lady Bellardo, eds., *A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers* (Chicago, 1992).

2 Society of American Archivists, *Guide to Donating Your Personal or Family Papers to a Repository* (1994) <<http://www.archivists.org/catalog/donating-familyrecs.html>>.

your community, state, or nation.” Indeed, they state, “through letters, diaries, and unpublished writings of many types, and also through the audible and visual records of recent times, researchers have been able to study and understand much about the history of particular families, communities, businesses, and organizations, the history of specific events and broader societal trends, and the history of the United States in general.”³

Despite such recognition on the part of the archival community of the importance of these materials, the appraisal of personal papers – both the identification of whose papers within society should be targeted for repositories and the appraisal of different materials within targeted collections – has been an area of study much neglected in the development of archival appraisal methodologies and within the professional literature. This article shows the weaknesses of the current literature in addressing central theoretical issues of value in relation to these collections, looking first at the exclusion of personal papers from early models of archival theory and the subsequent separation and marginalization of personal archives from government and corporate archives. It then discusses ways in which discourse on the appraisal of these collections might be strengthened by consideration of recent appraisal theories such as those of Hans Booms, who focuses on the relations between records and society, and macro-appraisal and documentation strategy, which focus on the motivations and functions of the records creator.

The Plight of Personal Papers in the Archival Profession

The realm of personal papers has been notably neglected in the course of the development of archival theory. From the beginning, government and corporate archives have been the primary focus, and personal papers have been largely excluded from the discourse. The first manual on archival theory, the *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, written by Dutch archivists Samuel Muller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin in 1898, defined archives as “the whole of the written documents, drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials.”⁴ As critic Terry Cook has noted, the *Manual* “is about government, public, or corporate archives and their orderly transfer to archival repositories to preserve their original order and classification; it dismisses private and personal archives to the purview of libraries and librarians.”⁵

3 Ibid.

4 S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (1898), 2d ed. (1940) Arthur H. Leavitt, trans. (New York, reissued 1968). Quoted in Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1992), p. 21.

5 Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue,” p. 21.

Indeed, this seems to be the case with all subsequent major works on archival theory. In his *A Manual of Archival Administration* published in 1922 and 1937, Sir Hilary Jenkinson also defined archival materials in strictly governmental terms, as including official copies of treatises, official correspondence between heads of state, accounts, reports, and memoranda. “These and their like are clearly Archive authorities for that historical fact, the Outbreak of War,” he writes,

and the quality common to all of them is that they are actual material parts of the administrative and executive transactions connected with it. The historian, coming afterwards, may examine, interpret, analyse, and arrange them for the purposes of his treatise: they themselves state no opinion, voice no conjecture; they are simply written memorials, authenticated by the fact of their official preservation, of events which actually occurred and of which they themselves formed a part.⁶

Regarding materials we would today call personal papers, Jenkinson is largely dismissive, if only because they do not apply to this central purpose of preserving “historical fact.” Materials such as “the memoirs of the German chancellor,” he writes, are “supplementary evidences, possibly valuable; but they are not in any primary sense Archives.” Because he is concerned with preserving factual documentation of war, Jenkinson’s definition of archives is understandably limited to those materials most free from bias or faults of memory. “On the one hand,” he states, “we have documents which are material survivals of certain administrative or executive transactions in the past, preserved for their own reference by the responsible persons concerned: first-hand evidence, because they form an actual part of the *corpus*, of the facts of the case. On the other hand we have statements and expressions of opinion by personas who may, or may not, have been capable reasoners, in a position to know the facts, or unprejudiced.”⁷ Jenkinson concedes that “given the opportunity he [the historian] will probably use both classes because he will want to know not only the facts but the circumstances of the case,” but states definitively that only the first class of materials is “indispensable.”⁸ Jenkinson’s definition of true archival material requires that the material be of an administrative and transactional nature: a record is valuable because it provides impartiality, due to its having been “drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction” of which “itself was formed a part,” and it provides authenticity because it was “subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own

6 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archival Administration*, Reprint of the 2d ed. (1937) (London, 1966), pp. 3–4.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors.”⁹

The first theorist to formally address archival appraisal in a sustained way, T.R. Schellenberg, also did so with a purposeful eye to administrative records. His reasons for putting forth a plan for appraisal were based on the recognition that “population increase has made necessary an expansion of governmental activity,” and that “a government cannot afford to keep all the records that are produced as a result of its multifarious activities.”¹⁰ Schellenberg’s key appraisal concepts, the testing of evidential and informational value, are therefore explicated in terms of government activity. Evidential value refers to “the evidence they [records] contain of the organization and functioning of the Government body that produced them,” and informational value refers to “the information they contain on persons, corporate bodies, things, problems, conditions, and the like, with which the government body dealt.”¹¹ While informational value could (and has been) extended to include the appraisal of personal papers, the overwhelming emphasis of Schellenberg, like Jenkinson, was on the institutional records of government.

As archival theory has continued to develop, it has followed the focus of these archival pioneers, and the professional literature has almost entirely neglected the appraisal of private manuscript materials. A rift between archivists concerned with government and corporate archives, and those concerned with personal papers (often termed “manuscript curators”) has emerged, causing many to doubt the profession’s commitment to the acquisition and care of personal papers. This tension is apparent in the recent debate between critics Robert McDonald and Christopher Hives regarding the status of private manuscript collections in Canada. In an initial commentary, McDonald states that he is witness to a “tide of diminishing commitment by British Columbia’s publicly-funded institutions to collect private records.” McDonald asserts that “historians and archivists must join together in recognizing the need for more determined initiatives if the collection and preservation of private records is to receive the level of public support they deserve.”¹² Hives counters this claim with the assertion that “cultural priorities ... have, of necessity, been supplanted by administrative priorities with respect to the management of recorded information throughout its life cycle.” Hives states that “these institutions have already done their fair share in the collection of private material,” and that “the preservation of the institutional record is and must be their pri-

9 Ibid., p. 11.

10 Theodore R. Schellenberg, “The Appraisal of Modern Public Records,” in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings in Archival Theory and Practice*, Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds. (Washington, 1984), p. 57.

11 Ibid., p. 58.

12 Robert A.J. McDonald and Christopher Hives, “Acquiring and Preserving Private Records – A Debate,” *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994), pp. 155–56.

mary responsibility.”¹³ McDonald’s rebuttal is that the focus on government and public records is detrimental to the aims of the profession in general: “I see archival records,” he states, “as a reflection of who we are as a people – our collective memory – and think it imperative that, if we are to understand our history, and hence ourselves, we find ways to preserve this patrimony.” McDonald comments that “by thinking administratively” archivists may “be losing sight of the broader cultural mandate of the archival profession.”¹⁴

This sentiment is shared by critic Adrian Cunningham, who laments that personal records archivists are left to “puzzle over the relevance and applicability of archival theory to our particular circumstances.”¹⁵ Cunningham comments that “a number of archivists, in their rush to find new allies and to deploy the powerful argument of ‘organizational accountability,’ appear to be willing to jettison, or at the very least downplay, our historical/cultural role.” “In the process,” he writes, “they may wittingly or unwittingly marginalize and stigmatize those archivists, most particularly collecting archivists, for whom historical/cultural considerations provide their *raison d’être*.”¹⁶ Cunningham notes the tendency in our professional literature to define records in strict transactional terms, due to what he terms the “corporate myopia affecting many of today’s archival theoreticians.” This conception, he goes on to state, “skirts the slippery concept of the evidential nature of records and excludes such non-organizational materials as personal diaries and literary drafts, the ‘recordness’ of which to me is defined by their evidential qualities.”¹⁷

Appraisal of Personal Papers: The Current Literature

Because developments in archival theory have largely bypassed the realm of personal papers, the professional literature addressing the appraisal of personal papers is both scant in quantity and lacking in specific guidelines for addressing key theoretical questions of which people within society should be targeted for the acquisition of papers, and which materials within those papers should be retained. The literature which does attempt to discuss these aspects of manuscript archiving generally defines archival value in two ways: in terms of serving research interests of users, and in terms of assessing how well the materials in question fit into the “collecting policy” of a given archives. In

13 Ibid., pp. 158, 161.

14 Ibid., p. 162.

15 Adrian Cunningham, “Beyond the Pale? The ‘Flinty’ Relationship between Archivists Who Collect the Private Records of Individuals and the Rest of the Archival Profession,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 1 (May 1996), p. 23.

16 Ibid., p. 22.

17 Ibid.

both cases, theoretical questions underlying appraisal are evaded and problems emerge.

A dominant characteristic of attempts to discuss appraisal of these types of materials is the focus on use as a means of ascertaining value. This use-based methodology harks back to notions promoted by Schellenberg in his discussions of government record appraisal. Schellenberg asserts that records “must be reduced in quantity to make them useful for scholarly research” and states that, in assessing the “importance” of records, archivists should “take into account the actual research methods of various classes of persons and the likelihood that they would under ordinary circumstances make effective use of archival material.”¹⁸ Much of the literature dealing with the appraisal of personal papers has followed in this vein. In her article on the acquisition of personal papers, Mary Lynn McCree states that the archivist’s “primary responsibility is to create a focused body of materials that informs the scholar.”¹⁹ When deciding whose papers to solicit, she states that “it becomes a matter of deciding which public you would most like to appeal to or to serve,” meaning either the scholarly world or the general public. “Usually,” she states, “your first concern is to create a collection that will be useful to your most immediate constituency.”²⁰ It is McCree’s conviction that the archivist of personal papers must seek specifically “to create a collection that holds a continuing interest and relevance for scholars as a research and teaching tool”; “Hopefully,” she writes, “the manuscripts you select will be used over and over again for a variety of topics and points of view.”²¹

This notion is further shared by Judi Cumming, who notes that “... archival repositories do not want to acquire private archival fonds that take up valuable shelf space and will require processing and conservation, if those fonds do not serve the research needs of their clientele”²² Similarly, Megan Floyd Desnoyers, in her chapter in James Gregory Bradsher’s archives textbook, writes that “manuscript repositories exist to serve scholars and students.”²³ “Their primary responsibility,” she advises, “is to create a focused body of research material that informs researchers on a specific topic.”²⁴ According to Desnoy-

18 Theodore R. Schellenberg, “The Appraisal of Modern Public Records,” pp. 57, 66.

19 Mary Lynn McCree, “Good Sense and Good Judgment: Defining Collections and Collecting,” in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings in Archival Theory and Practice*, Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds. (Washington, 1984), p. 105.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

22 Judi Cumming, “Beyond Intrinsic Value Towards the Development of Acquisition Strategies in the Private Sector: the Experience of the Manuscript Division, National Archives of Canada,” *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994), p. 233.

23 Megan Floyd Desnoyers, “Personal Papers,” in *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, James Gregory Bradsher, ed. (London, 1989), p. 80.

24 *Ibid.*

ers, in deciding which papers to pursue, archivists should consider first and foremost “the public they serve now and want to attract in the future.”²⁵

Graeme Powell, in his commentary on collections of personal papers in Australia, makes note of this tendency towards user-centred appraisal, observing that “libraries and archives that have collected personal papers have been driven strongly by the needs of researchers.”²⁶ Powell states that “potential research value is the criterion generally used in collecting and archivists are concerned and will be disappointed if, as the years pass, collections receive little use.”²⁷ Powell goes on to criticize this tendency, the repercussions of which are evident in the analysis he provides of the holdings listed in the *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts Relating to Australia*. As he describes, “the collections, taken as a whole, are unbalanced and ... many groups in society, both past and present, are represented in only the most meager way.”²⁸ This is a problem with Schellenbergian methodology which theorist Gerald Ham has noted, in his statement that use-based appraisal results in “a selection process so random, so fragmented, so uncoordinated, and even so often accidental” that it results in the reflection of “narrow research interests rather than the broad spectrum of human experience,” the archivist becoming “nothing more than a weathervane moved by the changing winds of historiography.”²⁹ Indeed, Powell notes a preponderance of papers of political figures and writers, noting that this emphasis within manuscript repositories is “partly due to the fact that political and literary historians have always been conspicuous in reading rooms and have worked closely with librarians and archivists.”³⁰ This focus on famous writers and politicians has, Powell relates, affected the archival representation of many groups in Australian society. While the number of collections of personal papers of women have drastically increased over the last several years of publication of the *Guide*, for instance, many of these women are writers, and women involved in most other professions and aspects of life are poorly documented. While I have come across no statistical summaries of manuscript distribution in other countries, it is not difficult to imagine that, given the prevalence of use-based acquisition strategies, a disproportionate number of literary manuscripts, papers of political and military figures, and papers of other “famous” members of society would be universal. It is

25 Ibid.

26 Graeme Powell, “The Collecting of Personal and Private Papers in Australia,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 1 (May 1996), p. 72.

27 Ibid., p. 73.

28 Ibid., p. 68.

29 Gerald Ham, “The Archival Edge,” in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings in Archival Theory and Practice*, Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds. (Washington, 1984), pp. 328–29.

30 Graeme Powell, “The Collecting of Personal and Private Papers in Australia,” p. 73.

interesting, and, in fact, telling to note that the only piece of professional literature to deal with the item-level appraisal of materials within a collection of personal papers is Philip N. Cronenwett's discussion of the appraisal of literary manuscripts.³¹

The notion that acquisition should be researcher-centred not only promises uneven representation of a society within archives, but also leads inevitably to more questions. Which researchers, for instance, are to be considered when making such decisions? Researchers with differing interests certainly hold differing opinions as to whose papers have the most enduring value, and which materials provide the most salient information. Unfortunately, in addition to being user-oriented, current writing on personal papers appraisal is plagued by a focus not on theoretical concerns which might address these questions, but on the logistical aspects of carrying out a repository's acquisition or collection policy, which would be defined by the focus on researcher needs discussed above. Where the question of "value" is mentioned, it is in a vague manner, often deferred to "experts" or "personal knowledge."

In her writing, for instance, Mary Lynn McCree focuses on the steps required to create a good collection policy: surveying your institution's resources to determine what primary and secondary resources they have that might complement a certain type of manuscript collection; looking at what resources other institutions have which might complement your projected collection; assessing your own institution's financial position; and negotiating for collections with dealers or private donors.³² In terms of ultimately addressing which materials to pursue, however, she states only that "it is imperative that an institution identify the resources it wishes to collect" before pursuing them.³³ The most important thing to consider, according to McCree, is that the materials pursued fall within the collecting policy and scope of the institution. Regarding the item-level appraisal of materials within the collection, she suggests that one may rely on "the published interpretations of historians," "your own knowledge of the subject," or "the advice and help of scholars with special knowledge or experience doing research on subjects that fall within the scope of your collection."³⁴

In her "Primer on Manuscript Field Work," Virginia Stewart also focuses primarily on logistics, discussing the steps involved in locating donors of material, making preliminary contact, following leads, negotiating, and transporting and receiving materials. For Stewart, as for McCree, the problem of

31 Philip N. Cronenwett, "Appraisal of Literary Manuscripts," in *Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance*, Nancy Pease, ed. (Lexington, 1984), pp. 105–116.

32 Mary Lynn McCree, "Good Sense and Good Judgement: Defining Collections and Collecting," p. 106.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

34 *Ibid.*

deciding which collections have enduring value to a repository is one of deciding whether the collection fits within the predetermined collection policy of the institution. Just how a collection policy should be developed is not the concern. Appraisal, as Stewart approaches it, involves “assessing the nature, informational content, and completeness of a manuscript collection and its relevance to an institution’s collection policy and goals.”³⁵ The archivist has the responsibility of “translating the repository’s acquisition goals into reality by developing strong holdings in which the individual collections are significant and the total collection shows depth, interrelatedness, and a perceptible relationship to the universe of data.”³⁶ What constitutes “strong” or “significant,” however, is left unclear, beyond the assertion that the collection must have “value to his repository” which is determined, again, by the degree of the “relationship of the proposed acquisition to the repository’s collecting policy.”³⁷

Judi Cumming, in her 1994 article on the acquisition strategy of the Manuscript Division of the National Archives of Canada, also echoes this focus on acquisition policy, stating that archival repositories that acquire private sector archival documents will have to “choose fonds based on their institutional acquisition mandates.”³⁸ Cumming goes on to describe the acquisition policy which was adopted by the Manuscript Division, and in doing so seems to bring to the forefront the problems and questions relying on such as strategy might raise. The “primary goal” of their acquisition policy, Cumming relates, is “to locate records creators in the private sector which commonly produce records of high archival value in relation ... to the meaning of national significance.”³⁹ The uselessness of this statement as a collecting criterion stems from both its failure to define “high archival value” and its extremely large and indeterminate scope, “national significance.” The broad acquisition categories which the Manuscript Division has identified as defining “national significance” include such areas as “the natural-physical, social, cultural, political, economic, and scientific development of Canada as a country,” “the evolution of a sense of Canadian national identity (French-English relations),” “multiculturalism,” “Canadian society as it is represented and defined in all its integral parts (regionality)” and “issues, events, and experiences typical or representative of life in Canada” – categories which might arguably encom-

35 Virginia R. Stewart, “A Primer on Manuscript Field Work,” in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings in Archival Theory and Practice*, Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds. (Washington, 1984), p. 129.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

38 Judi Cumming, “Beyond Intrinsic Value Towards the Development of Acquisition Strategies in the Private Sector” p. 232.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 235.

pass the personal papers of the entire population of the nation.⁴⁰ “High archival value” is determined in this strategy by appraisal criteria which is not only vague (assessing materials for “informational, evidential, and legal values, authenticity, organization, comprehensiveness, age, rarity and uniqueness”) but also circular: appraisal is to be done based on assessment of provenance or theme, that is, whether the records “fall within the acquisition mandate of the division,” and, most importantly, “their complementarity with existing fonds.”⁴¹

The appraisal criterion of whether a collection fits within a given institutional collecting or acquisition policy seems to inadequately address underlying questions, such as what are the materials within collections that might fit this policy and why are they archivally valuable? This is an issue which critic Timothy Ericson has begun to address. In “At the ‘rim of creative dissatisfaction’: Archivists and Acquisition Development,” Ericson argues that acquisition policies have failed to provide enough explicit guidelines in the selection of materials to ensure that the materials acquired actually have “value.” Ericson notes that archivists “have all read about the importance of imposing linguistic, geographical or chronological constraints on our acquisitions,” “have been told to consider the type of programmes which our archives supports, and the clientele whom it serves,” and therefore “can wax eloquent on the need for well-defined policies” and “articulate ... purpose, mission and goals.”⁴² He argues, however, that these observations do not address the subsequent problem faced by repositories acquiring these materials: that they are obtaining too many collections which, while they may fall within the parameters of the collection policy, do not contain “important information.”⁴³ A central facet of Ericson’s argument is that the most serious failing of archivists of personal papers is that they have not considered, fundamentally, what the reasons for saving certain records are: as he states, archivists “have not taken the time to conceptualize adequately why we are saving the records we have chosen to acquire.”⁴⁴ By equating the size of a repository’s holdings with the quality of the materials contained, Ericson argues, archivists have neglected to consider the type of information that is found in the materials, and whether that information provided is, regardless of its form, unique. One of Ericson’s key assertions is that acquisition policies “must ... include a more specific definition and analysis of whatever phenomena [archivists] are hoping to document.”⁴⁵ Ericson’s suggestion is that the information constituted by the

40 Ibid., p. 236.

41 Ibid., p. 238.

42 Timothy L. Ericson, “At the ‘rim of creative dissatisfaction’: Archivists and Acquisition Development,” *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–92), p. 68.

43 Ibid., p. 68.

44 Ibid., p. 69.

45 Ibid., p. 73.

materials, rather than the record itself, needs to be the focus of the archivist's attention in assessing these materials, and that once an understanding of the phenomena the archivist is documenting is achieved, archivists should look at the records creators and consider what portion of the information found in the archival record is significant, and what portion duplicates information that can be found in other types of sources or at other institutions such as libraries and museums.

All of the literature on the appraisal of personal papers discussed above, including Ericson's analysis, avoids discussion of the nature or understanding of the information that the contents of manuscript collections can provide; in effect, such a discussion would be the result of Ericson's more adequate "conceptualizing" on the questions of why we might choose to retain certain collections and not others, and certain materials within collections and not others. Only Sue McKemmish addresses this topic and thus the underlying theoretical question of what in regards to collections of personal papers might constitute "enduring value" to society. In "Evidence of Me...", she argues that personal "recordkeeping" is a way of "evidencing and memorialising" our lives, activities, and experiences, relationships with others, identity, and "place" in the world.⁴⁶ The role of an archivist dealing with personal papers, she states, is to ensure that these records be incorporated into "the collective archives" of a society so that this "evidence" is made an accessible part of a society's memory and cultural identity. McKemmish alone attempts to define a way in which archivists might look at personal papers with an underlying model with which to approach appraisal, in her assertion that "archivists can analyse what is happening in personal recordkeeping in much the same way as they analyse corporate recordkeeping." "Just as they can identify significant business functions and activities and specify what records are captured as evidence of those activities," she states, "so they can analyse socially assigned roles and related activities and draw conclusions about what records individuals in their personal capacity capture as evidence of those roles and activities."⁴⁷ McKemmish argues that the key questions to ask in regards to manuscript collections within archives include consideration of what records are associated with the various roles people take on in their society, what documentary form people want or need these records to be in, why people need to capture these roles in documentary form, and why some individuals accumulate records over time in ways that enable the formation of a personal archive at all. These considerations, she asserts, should inform the most salient decisions made by archivists concerning these types of materials. McKemmish notes that different documentary genres communicate different aspects of a life, and calls for increased

46 Sue McKemmish, "Evidence of Me..." *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 1 (May 1996), p. 29.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 30.

examination of the ways in which genres such as letters and diaries can be viewed as sources of both documentary information and evidence of relationships and societal roles. She ultimately asserts that archivists need to “further develop and share their understandings of the role of personal recordkeeping in our society and the ‘place’ of the personal archive in the collecting archive,” so that we may be provided with further “insights that enable us to understand recordkeeping per se as a social system.”⁴⁸

Modern Appraisal Models and Their Relevance to Personal Papers

McKemmish’s emphasis on the creators of personal papers, their motivations in creating the documentary forms which might constitute a manuscript collection, and the ways in which these forms are shaped by and emerge out of the society in which they are created, provides for a significant change in the way the appraisal of personal papers can be approached. The underlying ideas, however, do not themselves constitute a new way of looking at appraisal; they have in fact emerged, in the context of government and corporate records appraisal, in the ideas of theorist Hans Booms and in appraisal models following in Booms’s path, such as Terry Cook’s macro-appraisal, and Helen Samuels’s documentation strategy. It is possible, in examining the theory behind these models, to discern a certain relevance to the appraisal of personal papers.

Hans Booms suggested a new way of looking at the appraisal of government records, with a society-centred approach to archival theory. Booms’s central argument was that society, rather than potential researchers or current administrators, generates the values that define the archival significance, or value, of the records it creates. To make appraisal decisions, Booms asserted that the archivist must work from a knowledge of the societal framework and values of the records’ contemporaries, with the belief that “only the society from which the material originated and for whose sake it is to be preserved can provide archivists with the necessary tools to assess the conceptions by which they bring the past into the present.”⁴⁹ Ultimately, Booms went on to assert, archivists should identify a society’s values by examining the functions of the records creators themselves, and the relationship between these functions and the records created.

Terry Cook drew on these ideas in his development of the functional-structural macro-appraisal methodology. This appraisal methodology, centred on the appraisal of government records, focuses primarily on the societal context of records as revealed through the context and process of records creation, with the assumption that “those creators, and those citizens and organizations

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁹ Hans Booms, “Society and the Formation of Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources,” *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), p. 104.

with whom they interact, indirectly represent the collective functioning of society.”⁵⁰ Cook asserts that the conceptual act and processes surrounding creation of the record, rather than the record produced, should be the primary concern of the archivist: the archivist must understand “why records were created rather than what they contain, how they were created and utilized by their original users rather than how they might be used in the future, and what formal functions and mandates of the creator they supported rather than what internal structure or physical characteristics they may or may not have.”⁵¹ As he is concerned with records of government, Cook asserts that the archivist should examine records for what they suggest about the “reasons for and the nature of the communication between the citizen and the state – or any other institution for that matter – rather than ... what was communicated.”⁵²

Although Cook goes on to apply these ideas to institutional processes and records, it is possible to speculate how they might be applied to the records created in the course of private life. Indeed, this is essentially what McKemmish has done. Her central argument that the records of a life created by individuals should be viewed primarily in terms of the socially-driven functions, roles, and motivations of that individual is in effect the same argument, on a theoretical basis, as Cook’s earlier assertion that the functions and roles of the creators of government records, and the interactions these records illuminate between members of a society, should be considered first and foremost in the mind of the archivist.

This concept can also be found in Helen Samuels’s appraisal methodology, documentation strategy. Like macro-appraisal, documentation strategy has roots in the socially-oriented theories of Hans Booms and may be useful to consider when looking at personal papers. Samuels’s theory works from the assumption, as does Cook’s macro-appraisal model, that “records mirror the society that creates them.”⁵³ Broadly speaking, documentation strategy constitutes a way to document central themes, issues, or functions of a society, by crossing institutional boundaries and encouraging the co-operative analysis between many collecting repositories and many different forms of documentary material, spanning government and corporate archives, personal manuscript archives, museums, and libraries – all of which contribute to the broader understanding of the interrelationships between documentary forms. The underlying premise of Samuels’s analysis is that “integrated functions” of record creators “affect where and how the records of activities are created and

50 Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1992), p. 31.

51 Terry Cook, “Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal,” in *The Canadian Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, Barbara L. Craig, ed. (Ottawa, 1992), p. 47.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

53 Helen Samuels, “Who Controls the Past?” *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1986), p. 111.

where they are retained.”⁵⁴ Samuels asserts, as do Booms and Cook, that it is the context, motivation, and functions within which and to what end records are created which archivists must primarily consider: “archivists must start their selection activities not with a consideration of specific sets of records, but with an understanding of the context in which records are created.”⁵⁵

In addition to its focus on the functions and motivations of the records creator and his social context, Samuels’s approach is valuable to the realm of personal papers in that its emphasis on collaborative collecting strategies between institutions and documentary forms addresses and attempts to correct the marginalization of personal papers archiving within the profession. She promotes a better understanding of the role manuscript collections can play in archivists’ comprehensive documentation of society. Further, as Timothy Ericson observes, this recognition that a variety of information resources must be regarded in the consideration of acquisition policy addresses his concern that archivists consider the information they wish to seek before the record itself, and determine where in the realm of documentary material it might be located.

The ideas espoused by Booms, and the subsequent appraisal methodologies which draw upon them, provide a potentially useful framework for looking at personal papers. While it is not necessarily possible to translate them into a precise appraisal methodology, it is possible to see the ways in which the appraisal archivist might benefit from them as they appreciate the social context in which the records were created and used, and the underlying personal functions, roles, and processes driving records creation.⁵⁶

Conclusion

The determination of what is to become part of the permanent historical record – who and what we will document, and which materials best do so – is arguably the most important and central aspect of the archivist’s work. If we agree that, as the Society of American Archivists’ *Guide to Donating Your Personal or Family Papers to a Repository* states, personal papers constitute an essential, vital portion of our record, we must commit to giving the same consideration to the appraisal of these materials as we do to the appraisal of our government and corporate records. In this article, I have pointed out the marginalization of personal papers within archival theory, as well as the inade-

54 Helen Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Metuchen, 1992), p. 5.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

56 Studies of this nature have been done by historians and sociologists concerning materials typically found within collections of personal papers, such as personal letters, family photographs, memoirs, and diaries. See, for example, Susan Whyman, “‘Paper visits’: the post-Restoration Letter as Seen Through the Verney Family Archive,” in *Epistolary Selves: Letters and Letter-Writers, 1600–1945*, Rebecca Earle, ed. (Aldershot, 1999), pp. 15–36.

quacies of current literature which does address the appraisal of personal papers. I have also suggested, through discussion of the ideas of Hans Booms and subsequent appraisal methodologies which focus on the societal context of records and the functions and motivations of their creators, that the theoretical underpinnings of these approaches may have valuable contributions to make in our approach to the appraisal of personal materials. Until these ideas are actually applied through the development of specific methodologies and appraisal criteria, we cannot know for certain what practical bearing they may have. We can say with certainty, however, that as the profession continues to develop, it is imperative that the appraisal of personal papers continue to be addressed so that all types of archival materials are given the consideration their importance demands.