

**Archives: Recordkeeping in Society** . SUE MCKEMMISH et al. *Topics in Australasian Library and Information Studies* , no. 24. Wagga Wagga: Charles Sturt University, 2005. 348 p. ISBN 1-876938-84-6.

*Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* focuses on the formation of archives and the relationship between this formation and its cultural context. The book is

comprehensive in its scope and reflects the growing interest in the development of archives within juridical systems. The goal of the authors and editors, all leading archival scholars, is to examine areas of debate in the archival profession, which they see as “indicators of key points for mediation and change, requiring balancing, attention, and continuing adjustment” (p. iii). A number of the authors and all of the editors are proponents of records-continuum thinking so many of the essays are grounded in this view. The driver for much of the discussion is the increasing prevalence of electronic records. Indeed, they believe that technical change compels a paradigm shift in record-keeping, archival theory and practice, and in the record-keeping profession itself. Each of the chapters is accompanied by an annotated bibliography that suggests further reading and places the discussion in the context of the readings. This is a most helpful feature, both for archival education programs and for archivists who want to pursue a line of discussion.

Half of the book is an exploration of the formation of archives as seen through the lens of records-continuum thinking. The editors intend for each continuum essay to stand on its own and to be read in any order, “in totally non-linear ways, imagining the complex relationships that exist, or could exist, between the points in the four dimensions of the model” (p. 204). However, the editors have chosen a structure that is not entirely helpful to readers unfamiliar with or wishing to refresh their memories about continuum concepts. Chapter Eight “The Records Continuum,” by Frank Upward, provides a full explanation of the records continuum model and definitions of relevant terminology and would have been better positioned before the chapters dealing with this concept, including “Traces, Document, Record, Archive, Archives” (Sue McKemmish), “Documents” (Robert Hartland, McKemmish, and Frank Upward), “Records” (Barbara Reed), “The Archive” (Hans Hofman), and “The Archives” (McKemmish, Reed, and Michael Piggott).

In her chapter on archival traces, McKemmish explains the processes that change the traces of events or products of transactions into records that can act as evidence of the events or transactions. She illustrates how a document can end up in the fonds of various creators by using the example of the photographs and other documents created during the “Child Overboard” scandal in Australia in 2001. She uses this example to argue that the record-keeping and archiving processes involved in changing the archival traces into records show that records are “both fixed and mutable ... ‘constantly evolving, ever mutating’ ... as they are linked to other records and ever-broadening layers of contextual metadata that manage their meanings” (p. 14). Her argument is neither clear nor convincing. While McKemmish asserts that the “utility” and “recordness” of the records depends on their “evidentiary qualities” (p. 15), she does not adequately explain how records can serve as trustworthy evidence if they are changeable. Some of the lack of clarity may stem from the terms “document” and “record” being used interchangeably (which, inci-

dentially, also occurs in the essay, “Documents”). Perhaps this is linked to the records–continuum tenet that “documentation of a transaction is archival from the time the record is created and the archival document retains evidential value for as long as it is in existence” (p. 12). Canadian archivists who are more accustomed to defining a document as recorded information and a record as a special kind of document may find this use of terms confusing.

To mention these difficulties is not to take away from much that is interesting, useful, and thought-provoking in the essays that examine the records–continuum dimensions. In the most lucid chapter of this group, “The Archive,” Hofman examines the concept of the “archive” and how it is built in the context of the producing organization. He believes that the “anarchic nature” of new technologies makes it difficult to keep record-keeping rules in place and argues for the increased automation of record-keeping activities wherever possible. His ideas have immediate practical application for those implementing electronic record-keeping systems. Another noteworthy chapter in the continuum group is “The Archives,” where McKemmish, Reed, and Piggott show how different societies create collective archives in particular ways, depending on how the society views evidence and memory and on its archival ideas of reliability, authenticity, and trustworthiness.

The book’s remaining chapters deal with various themes, which will provoke interest and discussion in the archival community. They are the strongest essays in this collection, with several chapters providing further critical examination of the formation of archives within particular juridical systems. The juridical concept is at the forefront of Livia Iacovino’s essay, “Recordkeeping and Juridical Governance.” Her work is particularly useful in incorporating the juridical concept into the records continuum, highlighting where the law significantly impacts record-keeping processes. Adrian Cunningham, in “Archival Institutions,” identifies the “cultural/historical” role of archives as the impetus behind archival programs in Canada and the United States. He contrasts the situation in Europe where archives were established for legal and administrative purposes valuable to the government, giving them legitimacy and allowing them to “acquire a cultural/historical role from a position of strength” (p. 34), with the United States where archives’ ability to guarantee democratic rights and support accountability is not even now fully realized.

Upward offers further comment about the development of archives in the American cultural context. He suggests that the lack of accountability through recordkeeping in the United States, and its battle against “carpetbagging,” is a result of the replacement in the 1920s of pre-active recordkeeping with business records-management processes whereby workers filed records post-action. Canadian recordkeepers will recognize that record-keeping systems in our country are also generally post-action. Upward maintains that post-action record-keeping systems depend completely on the ability and integrity of the

individual recordkeeper to make sure that records are filed and that, furthermore, this reliance on individuals gives them an opportunity “to wax fat rather than look to the long-term well-being of business transactions across society” (p. 218). He argues that this issue alone should make archivists consider whether they are only “recipients of material that no longer has primary administrative uses, or whether they can be framers of the archives in the moments after the record is created” (p. 220). Pre-action recordkeeping is again possible through automation, he asserts, allowing for improved business processes and communication and the “immediate formation of archives within networked systems” (p. 220). Practitioners in charge of institutional records services will probably find Upward’s ideas constructive.

In “Professing Archives: A Very Human Enterprise,” Ann E. Pederson continues in the juridical context vein by observing that the record-keeping heritage of anglophone countries produced three strands of practice by the 1960s: manuscript librarianship, records management, and archival administration. These traditional roles have made it difficult to achieve “a comprehensive recordkeeping professional identity” (p. 59). However, she believes that electronic records have provided a “catalyst for reunification” (p. 60). She puts forward what she believes to be more accurate terms, “recordkeeper” and “recordkeeping,” describing an emerging profession that combines the responsibilities of all three strands. In the paradigm shift from traditional to current recordkeeping, she outlines five required changes: a change in mission; in the role of records and recordkeepers; in the locus of work; in professional education; and in the type of archival research being done. Pederson also notes a need for change in professional relationships from heritage scholars and other information professionals, to in-house legal, fiscal, audit, and IT professionals, that is, with powerful insiders rather than those who are equally marginalized” (p. 64).

The role of the archivist is a theme discussed by Chris Hurley in his absorbing essay, “Recordkeeping and Accountability.” He states that there are two aspects of accountability: accountability for actions *and* for ensuring good records are kept. His advice on accountability roles is useful to any record-keeping practitioner involved in the development of information management and protection policy. In the current environment, Hurley does not believe that recordkeepers can be trusted as agents of accountability. One area where change is required is in appraisal. He asserts that the behaviour of appraisers must be submitted to “external scrutiny, peer review, review and appeal, [and] audit,” that is, “a ‘forum’ for external assessment of their judgments” (p. 248). This idea has had currency in Canada for a number of years.

Eric Ketelaar also challenges the role of the archivist in “Recordkeeping and Societal Power,” but his challenge is more in line with the postcustodialist stance of McKemmish, Reed, and Piggott in an earlier mentioned chapter. The latter writers see “archivists as active participants in forming and continually

transforming the archives” (p. 164) and as builders of “social structures of remembering and forgetting” (p. 165). Ketelaar expands on this view by drawing on the ideas of Jack Goody, Anthony Giddens, and Michel Foucault. He describes records as instruments of power both for dominant and dominated groups and examines Jacques Derrida’s idea that there is no power of government without control over the archives. Ketelaar gives examples of how records created for one purpose can be transformed and used for other purposes, such as records of repressive regimes later used in truth and reconciliation commissions. It could be argued that these scenarios illustrate the impartiality of records and the potentially infinite types of research uses to which they can be applied. Ketelaar also makes the interesting observation that when a formerly repressive regime transitions to a democracy, the country’s archival institutions are transformed from identifying with the regime to “refashioning public archives and refiguring them into archives of the people” (p. 292).

The final theme of the book is the role of archives in the formation of memory, a role that Michael Piggott believes to be overstated. He claims that all memory is social and that what we remember is shaped not only by archives but also by relationships, colonialism, war, and by what he calls “cultural heritage ‘mediators’” (p. 313), such as ritual observances and monuments. He also asserts that cultures remember what is needed to go forward into the future, even in the absence of records, although one could argue that when records are deliberately destroyed, civil and property rights are certainly undermined. Piggott affirms, however, that archives are crucial to the forming of collective memory in certain circumstances, such as the forming and preserving of a social identity, and in providing “agreed statements, from the present to the future, which say that this is what we collectively and officially agreed to say happened” (p. 326). Piggott also points out the role that users play in “perpetuating and reinventing individual and collective memory ... by drawing on the archives, which are as a result reused again and again” (p. 327).

The professional archivist will find many of the ideas in *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society* useful and stimulating. It should be pointed out, though, that this is a challenging book to digest. Some of the records–continuum chapters are written in dense, overly-complicated prose that makes for a very slow, sometimes exasperating read, even for experienced archivists. One wonders if the book in its entirety will be of use to graduate students, an intended audience. Over all, however, it makes an important contribution to the body of archival literature.

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