

# Book Reviews



**Understanding Archives & Manuscripts.** JAMES M. O'TOOLE and RICHARD J. COX. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006. 237 p. ISBN 1-931666-20-2.

From the start, the authors set ambitious goals for *Understanding Archives & Manuscripts*, a publication within the Archival Fundamental Series II from the Society of American Archivists (SAA). In one volume, they intend to explain how and why records of all types are created; outline the history of archivists and the archival profession; define the knowledge, values, responsibilities, and duties expected of an archivist; summarize the latest challenges faced by the profession; and provide a succinct but comprehensive essay on authoritative works in each of the areas they have discussed. In addition, this volume is intended to be approachable enough “for the beginning archivist, for the administrator contemplating establishment of an archives, for the potential donor of archival material, for anyone interested in learning about archives” (p. xvi). By keeping their discussions at a high enough level to avoid distracting minutiae, James M. O’Toole and Richard J. Cox succeed in making an unwieldy topic surprisingly accessible.

The opening chapter addresses the origins of recording information, moving swiftly from orality to the evolution of literacy, the need to keep records, record-keeping technology, and the need for archives. There is one unusual omission in their historical overview. In their discussion of the “urge to save” and “urge to destroy” dichotomy of recordkeeping, the authors focus exclusively on the intentional destruction of records to eradicate history without ever mentioning the legally sanctioned and necessary destruction of redundant records that occurs daily through records management. The conclusion of the opening chapter naturally segues into a discussion of the evolution of the archival profession, touching on its beginnings in Europe but focusing mainly on its development in the United States. This focus is to be expected given the origin of the publication, but it serves as a reminder

that a similarly concise yet revealing overview of the growth of the archival profession in Canada would be desirable.

After outlining the historical aspects of archives and the archival profession, the remainder of the book discusses the values and knowledge required to undertake the duties and responsibilities expected of an archivist. Summarizing key concepts succinctly, the authors make simplified statements that encompass the overall beliefs espoused by the profession as well as the fundamental tasks undertaken by archivists. The list of tasks includes descriptions of the often-overlooked management and advocacy work necessary for an archival program to function effectively. The issues of equitable access, privacy, and security dominate the reference and access section, but the thorny issue of copyright is never mentioned, an odd omission given the ongoing debate about copyright reform.

The examination of an archivist's daily work naturally leads into a chapter discussing the current challenges facing today's archivists. With their discussion of postmodernism, new technologies (including the Internet) and digital records, ethics and security, the need for advocacy, and issues surrounding professional identity, the authors neatly summarize some of the ongoing debates among practitioners. The concluding chapter of the book is a forty-page bibliographic essay that, despite the authors' claims that it is not intended to be comprehensive, admirably supplements the information provided in the preceding chapters and points out subjects requiring updated research.

While the nature of this volume is to provide an overview of the material without too much detail in any one area, more than thirty pages of endnotes provide support to the authors' conclusions and direct the curious reader to supplementary resources in all subject areas to provide more analysis and depth. Canadian archival theorists and *Archivaria* articles are featured prominently in the endnotes as well as the bibliographic essay, indicating a broader perspective than the book's American origins might suggest. Many of the works cited and highlighted in the essay are familiar to any experienced archivist, but some unusual sources and suggestions for research make their perusal worthwhile for new as well as seasoned archivists.

For archivists seeking examples of acquisition policies, preservation standards, or advice on how to describe a rarely-encountered medium, they would be advised to look at another SAA publication more specifically addressing that topic, or consult a more basic work that focuses on the day-to-day work of archival administration. *Understanding Archives & Manuscripts* complements these works by expanding on the who and why of the world of archives, creating a coherent context for the uninitiated, and providing a network of resources to navigate that world more effectively.

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