

Book Reviews



Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling: Readings, Reflections and Ruminations. RICHARD J. COX. Duluth: Litwin Books, 2008. 418 p. ISBN 978-0-9802004-7-8.

Over the past few years, Richard Cox has been grappling with, and writing about, the mounting challenges of preserving digital records and web products – email, tweets, blogs, and websites – produced by the public in *Records and Information Management Report* and his personal blog, *Reading Archives*. This substantial work, *Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling*, attempts to consolidate all of his thoughts and findings relating to this topic, as well as the broader issue of preserving traditional personal records such as correspondence, diaries, scrapbooks, home videos, and photo albums, in order to convince information professionals, particularly archivists, to dedicate more of their time and resources to the task of preserving hard-copy or digital family archives. Despite the fact that many archival institutions are already engaged in acquiring and preserving personal records, Cox asserts that the majority are focused on traditional materials that are either already part of their holdings or destined for their repositories. Few archives, he argues, have paid much attention to the traditional and digital collections assembled by families that are located in their homes or on the Web.

Cox begins by describing what motivates individuals to collect family memorabilia. He emphasizes how important the act of collecting is to families, providing the custodians with insight into their ancestors and their past, and ultimately, in his words, serving as “evidence of our existence” (p. 120). In turn, family records, he notes, elicit warm memories of family members, particularly those who are no longer with us, as well as memorable family trips, events, and activities. Despite their zeal for collecting, Cox states that most amateur archivists have little understanding of how to properly preserve their traditional and digital family treasures. This, he asserts, could result in a “loss of memory and identity” or in essence, a type of “social alzheimers” on the part of the families involved (p. 166). While this has been an ongo-

ing concern for some time, the production and proliferation of digital family records, and the impact of new technologies have made the challenge even greater. Cox illustrates how traditional family records have been replaced with digital equivalents such as email, teets, blogs, virtual scrapbooks, Flickr photo albums, YouTube videos, and family websites. These digital records are more voluminous, ephemeral, and subsequently, much more difficult to preserve.

Cox believes that because of the staggering challenges involved in archiving personal web content (he reveals that 71 million blogs alone were posted on the Web as of May 2007), information professionals are in no position to commit to tackling this on their own. He states that “while in the past archivists have generally held to a collecting and physical agenda, it seems that now these professionals need to work with private individuals to instruct them about how to provide a modest amount of care for personal and family archives” (p. 286). Consequently, he issues a call to the profession to create guides and videos, as well as offer workshops and training to the public, in order to assist and empower these “citizen archivists” to take on this challenge for themselves (p. 231).

Cox admits that although information professionals have made some strides over the years, examining some of these issues vis-à-vis their own holdings or those of government departments, very little effort has been made to assist and train the public to become custodians of their own family archives. For instance, Cox cites initiatives such as “Paradigm” (Personal Archives in Digital Media), the Oxford and Manchester Project, which has been engaged in assisting archival institutions with the preservation of digital personal papers as well as the InterPARES Project, overseen by the University of British Columbia, aimed at the preservation of authentic, digital records. There have also been some major endeavours to archive websites. However, as Cox notes, none of these is really geared toward the preservation of family records, and all are far from comprehensive in their coverage.

Within Canada, there has been a modicum of effort on the part of archival institutions and associations to address the challenges that Cox outlines in his work. For instance, in November 2009, the Canadian Council of Archives held a national plenary in Gatineau as part of its annual “Archives and You” series, aimed at users of archives, which included several presentations on preserving family archives. A search of the websites of archival institutions across the country revealed that several offered tips designed to guide the public on how to preserve their traditional and digital family records. A small number of institutions (like my own, the Ontario Jewish Archives), offer training to the public on how to preserve their family treasures, often in partnership with local historical and genealogical societies. These types of partnerships have proven to be instrumental in helping us to reach the right audience and preach the archival gospel of selection, preservation, and storage.

While Cox’s work is somewhat long and at times repetitive, and likely not

very accessible to amateur archivists, it does offer a strong and compelling message regarding the serious challenges that digital records and the Web pose to both our profession and to amateur family archivists. Since the intent of the Web has been to remain as open and democratic as possible, perhaps the populist approach that Cox promotes is ultimately the best remedy. It is evident that the time has come for archivists to share the responsibility for preserving personal records with the public, which can be accomplished by empowering and better preparing our constituents to contend with the difficulties and perils of preserving their digital treasures on their computers and on the Web. Despite the fact that we may regard this type of memorabilia as overly voluminous and non-archival if it falls outside of our institutional mandates, as Cox persuasively argues, these types of records do hold tremendous value to their custodians and to society. By abandoning our traditionally narrow perspective, we can share our unique skills with a segment of society that may never have stepped inside an archives before, resulting in the broadening of our clientele and support base, and subsequently educating the public about how to take control over their family archives.

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The Story Behind the Book: Preserving Authors' and Publishers' Archives. LAURA MILLAR. Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Studies in Publishing Press, 2009. 224 p. ISBN 978-0-9738727-4-3.

Designed to introduce archives and their preservation to authors and publishers, Laura Millar's *The Story Behind the Book* discusses the importance of authors' and publishers' archives, and provides strategies for maintaining records in-house and for approaching an archival institution to preserve them. The book is a follow-up to her 1989 publication *Archival Gold*; it covers extended territory by treating the archives of authors as well as those of publishers in an international context, and by discussing digital archives. The title hints that it may provide the history of the acquisition and preservation of literary and publishing archives; however, the work is not a deep analysis for archivists. Rather, its light tone is meant to entice writers and publishers into preserving their archives.

Millar is a persuasive writer. Her direct language and humour are well suited to a work of this type; she frequently is able to dovetail her thoughts to the experience of her audience. With reference to preservation, she states, "Publishers know more than most about the differences in quality, longevity, and cost of the paper used for printing and binding" (p. 124). At another point she engages the ever-growing archival literacy and interest of authors, with examples such as Margaret Atwood's donation to a library of an original letter