

# Book Reviews



**Currents of Archival Thinking.** TERRY EASTWOOD and HEATHER MACNEIL. Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2010. 254 p. ISBN 978-1-59158-656-2.

The aim of this collection of ten essays is to explore the “progression, direction, and drift of archival thinking about the nature and purpose of archives[,] and the role of archivists and archival institutions in the preservation of documentary heritage” (p. vii). The volume comprises three sections. Part 1, “Foundations,” considers the development of archival theory over time; Part 2, “Functions,” focuses on some of the pragmatic implications of managing records; and Part 3, “Models and Metaphors,” examines some of the assumptions that have helped frame the archival mindset.

This is primarily a Canadian product. The editors are well known Canadian academics Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil, based at the University of British Columbia and the University of Toronto, respectively. Of the eleven authors, six are Canadian (four academics and two professional practitioners); the remaining contributors are academics (three are from the United States, one from the United Kingdom, and one from Australia). The book exhibits a mainly Canadian context and largely Anglophone perspective, and focuses on record-keeping environments originally influenced by English governmental administrative practice. A more influential framework however, described by Heather MacNeil in her introduction, was that outlined by Terry Cook in 1997.<sup>1</sup> This highlighted two broad themes: that archivists are active shapers of documentary heritage, rather than passive, objective custodians; and that archival theory is determined by context, time, and place rather than being universal and unchanging. This approach, perhaps originally conceived as postmodern, is widely accepted today and underpins this work.

1 Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas since 1898 and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 17–63.

Within this framework is presented a set of valuable essays, tightly edited and well constructed. Contributors were invited to consider a wide range of issues: from provenance, the continuum, appraisal, description, and mediation to accountability, memory, preservation, and the personal record. Authors were asked to consider these retrospectively and prospectively so as to bring coherence and consistency to the book, and to reflect on how the issue under discussion had been understood historically; how it is understood today; where points of continuity and contestation might reside; how technological changes had affected current thinking; and finally, how currents of thinking in other disciplines had influenced our understanding of the issue in question (p. vii).

Each essay broadly aligns itself with these requirements. In “A Contested Realm,” Terry Eastwood provides a preliminary reflection on the nature of archives, and an elegant analysis of recent challenges to traditional perspectives that provides an authoritative introduction for all that follows. Jennifer Douglas completes the first section by considering perceptions of provenance over time. She argues that provenance is no longer perceived as primarily a physical construct – a method for organizing archives within hierarchical aggregations. Rather, she suggests, it has become an intellectual concept allowing a more inclusive appreciation of the contexts that surround all bodies of archives. She cautions against associating provenance too closely with the notion of context, however, arguing that it is impossible to determine where the boundary between the two might lie. She says there is “an inherent difficulty in determining where context ends, and an understanding of provenance that includes any and all contextual factors that influence record-making and recordkeeping will have to admit the impossibility of its own endeavour” (p. 37).

Part 2 comprises four essays on the professional issues of appraisal, preservation, description, and mediation between users and archival material. All provide useful summaries of the core beliefs and practices. Those on appraisal and description perhaps contribute more to the conceptual debate, exploring in some detail the effect of postmodern notions on professional practice, suggesting (as did Jennifer Douglas in relation to provenance) that taken far enough, these concepts negate many of the traditional, historical approaches they have described. Ciaran Trace, writing on appraisal, contends that “postmodernism and deconstruction open the door to an appraisal process characterized by relativism, fragmentation, and pluralism” making any definitive theory of appraisal unachievable. Geoffrey Yeo, in his discussion of description, argues that postmodern approaches would deny the archivist’s belief that it is either desirable or possible to classify, arrange, and describe archives, or to apply definitive standards such as ISAD(G) successfully. Instead of standardized and consistent descriptions, multiple contexts need to facilitate multiple interpretations: reality is far more complex than the archival standards allow,

and representations can never be complete or comprehensive. Trace and Yeo both suggest that part of a solution lies in Web 2.0 social software applications – where people can create their own “archival” communities, and archives can facilitate the external contribution of descriptions to their catalogues.

Located predominantly in the paper paradigm, Wendy Duff considers matters of archival mediation, that is, the provision of reference services, while Michèle Cloonan considers issues of preservation. Duff describes how the reference archivist operates, noting that there is insufficient research in the whole area of reference services. While most attention is given to on-site provision, the implications of digital access are discussed briefly. Here Web 2.0 applications are presented as something of a liability – they can “undermine the archives’ control” or “threaten the traditional role of an archives,” an apparently retrospective approach (p. 131). More useful, as on-site demand diminishes, might be some reflection on how services can optimize what the “Google generation” can access online, including providing the contextual information normally supplied at a reference interview. Cloonan provides a useful historical summary of preservation and of the issues and challenges in preserving analogue materials, particularly paper, with some insight into the issues affecting the preservation of digital records. Overall, this essay takes a practical rather than a conceptual approach and we are left wondering how the philosophy of preservation has changed over time.

Part 3 comprises four essays focusing on: the life cycle and continuum, archives and collective memory, personal records and archives, and accountability. Glenn Dingwall traces the development of the life cycle and continuum concepts, arguing that models provide valuable empirical frameworks for shaping practice, but that these are bound to change over time. Hence the continuum builds on, rather than replaces the life cycle model. The continuum approach, he argues, has expanded the power of archivists both in relation to appraisal and description. Logically this should indeed be so, but in practice how do we know what impact archivists routinely have on the creation of records, or how far our descriptive practices specifically influence how archives are used? Margaret Hedstrom too, sounds a note of caution to archivists who make claims for the role of archives and archivists that do not always bear close examination. In her essay, “Archives and Collective Memory,” she challenges such statements as “archives are our memories” by asserting that these are built on an analogy between archives and collective memory that does not stand up to scrutiny: “... archival documents are not representations of collective memory and archival institutions are not storehouses of collective memory.” More accurately, she asserts that, “... archives are sources for the potential discovery or recovery of memories that have been lost” (p. 176) – a warning perhaps not to get too carried away by postmodern rhetoric.

In “Re-envisioning the Personal,” Catherine Hobbs asserts that archivists have done a disservice to personal records by attempting to impose on them

the methods and processes used for managing official and organizational records. This is a timely call to reconsider our whole approach, and to consider that the most relevant issue about personal documentation may not be its identity as a “record” but its link to experience; that what needs to be captured and described, as far as possible, is the creator’s own approach and intention in relation to documenting their own material.

Accountability is widely accepted as a key driver for good recordkeeping. Livia Iacovino acknowledges that accountability viewed through a postmodern lens is multi-faceted, and that the value systems that define accountability are products of their time and place. She asks how archivists can continue to support accountability effectively in an environment of instant communication, decentralized networks, fragmented recordkeeping, and digital fragility. She argues for a continuum approach – one that includes involvement from the formation of the record, during retention decisions, ensuring appropriate access and security – while acknowledging that realistically archivists may not have influence in all of these areas.

My copy of *Currents of Archival Thinking* is already dog-eared, not through any production fault, but from constant reference. This volume provides a valuable early twenty-first-century insight into historical and contemporary perceptions and practices. Overall it is an outstanding addition to the literature. It is both scholarly and accessible, and should be essential reading for students and anyone needing more than a superficial introduction to the discipline.

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**Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories.** MICHAEL J. KURTZ. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004. 254 p. ISBN 1-931666-09-1.

In the last few decades, as archivists have thought and written more attentively about our work, an oft-heard lament has been that we do not put as much effort into honing our management skills. During recruitment for high-level positions, the question is often, “Will they hire an archivist who can manage, or a professional manager who ‘gets’ archives?” Which is better? Which is worse? Students of archivy may chafe at courses on management, but when later confronted with the responsibility of planning and advocating for an archival program, a text on management proves useful. *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* is particularly useful as it focuses explicitly on managing an archives, and is quite palatable as it brings a humanistic approach to management.

Michael Kurtz’s text is one of seven volumes in the Archival Fundamental