

# Book Reviews



**The Future of Archives and Recordkeeping: A Reader.** JENNIE HILL, ed. London, England: Facet Publishing, 2011. xx, 244 p. ISBN 978-1-85604-666-4 (softcover).

“There has never been a more interesting time to be an archivist.” So asserts Jennie Hill in her introduction to this splendid collection of essays. Support for that somewhat “grand claim” is, as she explains, offered explicitly in the theme of her introduction and implicitly in the reflection of almost all the authors in their individual essays. According to Hill, “archives are moving from a profession predicated on the unquestioning repetition of routine towards a more self-aware, self-reflexive professional outlook, which can only be of benefit to the archival profession” and, equally, to new generations and types of users (p. xvii). I readily applaud Hill’s comment; it presents in one sentence what is, to my mind, the single most fundamental change in our profession in recent decades. Yes, we have witnessed many notable innovative approaches in appraisal and description, in standards and preservation, in network building (both online and professional), in outreach and graduate education, in born-digital records archiving, and in automating archival processes, all themes addressed in these essays. But overarching these strategies and processes has been the gradual (and now strong) realization within the profession that archivy is more than methodology, anything but routine, and almost infinitely complex. Our profession has matured, in Hill’s terms, to become self-aware enough of the need to reflect, to interrogate continually, and to reinvent first principles, to acknowledge our power and social impact as well as our blind spots and unwarranted assumptions. All of this is occurring not in the quiet comfort of our own institutions, but under the increasing (and sometimes hostile) glare of the public, government, sponsors, and academics from many disciplines who have discovered the archive. In light of all this and much more, this book is both an energized articulation for seasoned professionals and a fine entrée for those inside and outside the profession to whom these ideas may be unfamiliar. As the editor states, the book is not intended to be a practical guide to professional practice, but is aimed at those who want to

understand the new concepts now animating archival practice and how they have evolved so radically in recent years.

Jennie Hill, the book's editor and co-author of the opening chapter, is a lecturer in Archives and Records Management in the Department of Information Studies at Aberystwyth University; she previously worked in local and national archives in the United Kingdom. She was the co-organizer of the highly successful 2008 conference *Archive Fervour/Archive Further: Literature, Archives and Literacy Archives*, and in many ways this book continues that conversation (although with different authors), including its Derridean allusion.<sup>1</sup> If it has never been more interesting to be an archivist, it is also the case that both archives and the archive have never been more popular and their presence more in the public eye. Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* – “whether we like it or not (or indeed whether we have even read it or not),” Hill quips – has situated archives as central to much academic discourse, and indeed well beyond. “After many years in the wilderness, discussed only among archivists and a handful of historians,” Hill continues, “archives are finally on the larger agenda and it is imperative that the archival community engage with these debates and discussions if we wish to ensure that our discipline is heard” (p. xviii). As more than one author in the volume asserts, not only do we need to be heard, but the very survival of our distinct and valued profession in post-modern and digital society depends on it.

The book is divided into four sections. The first, “Defining Archives,” casts down the gauntlet of the major changes of the last couple of decades: “the notion of the archives as static, impartial carriers of truth has been challenged; the role of the archivist as a neutral guardian of records has been questioned; the way in which users approach archives, and their engagement with them, has been re-thought” (p. xviii). These general themes are addressed by Victoria Lane and Jennie Hill, the new user expectations and impacts by Sue Breakell, and the rich ideas about the archive from outside our profession by Alexandrina Buchanan.

The second section, “Shaping a Discipline,” looks at the tensions between the traditional and new ways of thinking. These are represented, respectively, by Luciana Duranti, who discusses a repurposing of diplomatics for the digital age; and by Eric Ketelaar, who explores the deeper characteristics of archives as art or science, arguing that even the scientific dimensions of Duranti's structuralist analysis evoke “tacit narratives” and require the application of “creative skill and imagination” (p. 96), which, by definition, is an art.

1 See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996). While several archivists early on engaged with Derrida's ideas, the most sustained and eloquent Derridean explorations have been by Verne Harris; see his collected essays, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007).

The third section, “Archives 2.0: Archives in Society,” contains a trio of provocative essays: Verne Harris, perhaps at his most eloquent, demonstrates the inescapable connection of power, politics, and ethics in any archival activity; Kate Theimer expands her important investigations of what users inhabiting an interactive, social media world mean for archives; and Andrew Flinn extends his recent provocative explorations into the impact of independent and community archives on professional thinking and practice – an impact that, ultimately, “rejects the chimeras of objectivity and neutrality in favour of more transparent interventions, an acknowledgement of subjectivity and an embracing of active engagement with the archives and their creators” (pp. 165–66).

“Archives in the Information Age: Is There Still a Role for the Archivist?” is the final section. It looks to that “future” that is the title and purpose of this collection. Adrian Cunningham refreshes concepts of the postcustodial (and the linked postmodern) archive, which has less to do with where archives are physically stored than how they are conceived, and less about means (which will always vary with time, place, and traditions) than about serving a wide range of ever-changing ends. He thus counsels that “being flexible, open-ended and postcustodial is by far a better orientation for archives than being rigid, narrow-minded and passively focused on custodial considerations and operations” (p. 186). Nicole Convery underlines that archivists, in their rush to be recordkeepers and information or records managers, or at least to align very closely with the goals and work of those professions, overlook or marginalize their cultural mission at their own peril and to the impoverishment of society. Richard Cox concludes by focusing on appraisal, “the core, critical function of archival work” (p. 230), all the more important in the digital age of information chaos when a profession that specializes in separating wheat from chaff for the long term can offer significant value to society. “Archivists will be more documentary shapers than documentary custodians,” Cox concludes, “more digital forensic experts than documentary describers, and more archival activists than passive reference gatekeepers.” In this new world, the archive “is not simply a depository, which implies stasis, but is ... defined by its revision, expansion, addition, and change” (pp. 231–32). It must also be defined, as Verne Harris extols, by new ethics based on a “fundamental hospitality,” offered by those who form the archives and regulate its use to those who are alienated from it and “strain to be heard in it,” all the while reaching together for that social justice that must animate us (pp. 118–19).

Given that their profession has long been defined by its guardian role, by what Jennie Hill refers to as the “shadow of Jenkinson” (p. 20) and his positivist assumptions and curatorial methodologies, archivists “are slow to change and adapt, reluctant to let go of past principles that do not always hold, whilst the world moves on around us. And yet we stand on the cusp of something great – a rethinking, a re-appraisal if you will – of our profession and our role in society ... We cannot see the future precisely because we are not repeating

those same gestures uncritically; we are witnessing the real birth of our discipline” (p. xx). That is why Hill confirms that there has never been a more exciting time to be an archivist – and why every archivist should read and reflect on this stimulating book. *Your* future may well depend on it.

**Terry Cook**  
**Archival Studies Program**  
**University of Manitoba**