

**Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions: Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels.** TERRY COOK, ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011. 434 p. ISBN 978-1-931666-36-9.

Helen Willa Samuels was Institute Archivist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1977 until her retirement in 2004. As an author, lecturer, and archival theorist, her impact on the archival profession has been profound. Samuels suggested a course of action to radically reformulate the role of the archivist by arguing that the archivist should undertake an enlarged role as an *active* participant in the inter-institutional documentation of society in an accountable, inclusive, collegial, and transparent fashion. Planning and study were to precede acquisition. Within one's own institution, functional analysis was the tool of choice to be used for systematic and rational appraisal and acquisition. The articles in this *festschrift* honour the prescient and persuasive work of Samuels, who made us look more critically at our role in "controlling the past."

The influence of Samuels is exemplified by the diversity of the seventeen authors who contributed to this volume. Their articles reflect the many ways that appraisal issues raised by Samuels have been interpreted, applied, adapted, and extended in a variety of institutional contexts. Textual, electronic, and photographic media are all considered. The political, ethical, and economic venues in which we work are taken into account. The cybercultural world, with its problems and possibilities, is analyzed. The progress of the archival profession and its self-reflexive investigations into definitions, codes, and standards, are outlined.

The book is divided into two sections, although the boundary between them is permeable and the articles throughout share common core themes, even as the focus shifts. Part I, "Documenting Society," consists of articles by Tom Nesmith, Gregory Sanford, Joan M. Schwartz, Nancy Bartlett, Richard Cox, Bruce Bruemmer, Robert Horton, Rick Barry, Richard Katz, and Paul Gandel. Part II, "Representing Archives / Being Archival," contains articles by David Bearman, Elizabeth Yakel, Brien Brothman, Francis X. Blouin Jr., James O'Toole, Verne Harris, and Randall Jimerson. Elizabeth Kaplan provides the penultimate entry, a bibliographical essay on the works of Helen Samuels, and Samuels herself contributes the final words in an autobiographical coda. Every essay in this volume is rich and multi-layered, and together they cover nearly every aspect of what it means to "act archivally," with all the challenges of doing so in a complicated world.<sup>1</sup>

1 The reader is reminded that other professionals in the archival field have addressed appraisal issues, including Terry Eastwood and Barbara Lazenby Craig. They have each made significant contributions through their articles, edited books, and monographs.

Terry Cook has supplied a very useful introductory essay explaining the genesis of this *festschrift*. He describes the evolution of the archivist with respect to appraisal issues raised by Samuels' insightful 1986 article in *American Archivist* entitled "Who Controls the Past,"<sup>2</sup> and he reviews the epistemology of the practices Samuels prescribed in that article and, later, in *Varsity Letters*.<sup>3</sup> With this overview, Cook alerts the reader to the salient themes of the individual essays. His synthesis of the main arguments is helpful in a volume as complex as *Controlling the Past*.

Helen Samuels prefaced her 1986 article with a reference to George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, reiterating what could happen when information is manipulated and used to concentrate power in the hands of a totalitarian dictatorship. Randall Jimerson provides an excellent account of how this Orwellian nightmare could appear (pp. 364–372) and the cautions it holds for knowledge workers who fail to recognize the importance of legitimate and carefully considered recordkeeping.

If archivists were grappling with documentation strategy and functional analysis in the 1980s, they were also engaged in redefining themselves in other ways. James O'Toole and Francis X. Blouin Jr. review the history of the archival profession. Blouin concentrates on the separation of historian and archivist in the late twentieth century, while O'Toole writes about the struggles of American archivists to define exactly what it means to be an archivist. It is useful to be reminded that archivists were re-examining all aspects of their profession, and that Samuels' work grew out of this time of reflection and re-evaluation.

Documenting society demands adequate contextualization and description of the records under our control. Citizens cannot perceive gaps and silences and absences without our commitment to transparency and accountability. As several authors note, there are many stratagems – some narrowly focused and some more broadly conceived – that archivists can employ to make our contextualization of the record more robust. Tom Nesmith suggests that we add appraisal reports to our finding aids, which would contextually augment the record and make us overtly accountable for our decisions. The photograph can be particularly vexatious; Joan Schwartz notes the many concerns that must be taken into account when describing photographs, which are notoriously easy to perceive as evidence of a "real" past, and which are so easily separated from context. Adding such descriptors as "colour" to our archival descriptions can make the historical record more accurate and remind us that the archive

2 Helen Willa Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 109–24.

3 Helen Willa Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists; Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1992).

is, as Nancy Bartlett suggests, much more than a black-and-white world.<sup>4</sup> The ideological implications of description are explored by Brien Brothman in an inspired analysis of three influential appraisal methods (InterPARES 1, Record Continuum, and Documentation Strategy). His deconstruction of graphic representations of procedures allows him to demonstrate that visuals can both reveal *and* obscure power trajectories. Graphic representations of processes can indicate the actual locus of power and the direction of its dissemination. The deployment of power is something we should all be aware of as we design databases, websites, finding aids, and administrative forms, whether we express information as schematics or as text.

Technology creates massive amounts of records, but it also has the potential to help us manage the deluge and assist us in documenting society more fully and coherently. Several writers remind us of inherent perils and ways to safeguard against deficiencies. Adequate documentation that is consistent with both evidence and memory is critical, yet as Richard Katz and Paul Gandel point out, digital records are ephemeral and easily manipulated. By looking at the history of, and the advertising campaigns for, duplicating and photocopying machines, Richard Cox reminds us that such devices have not been a source of unalloyed joy for archivists because they have produced an unprecedented volume of paper arriving in the archives. A further cautionary note comes from Robert Horton, who describes a series of events in Minnesota that illustrate the contested nature of the balance between freedom of information and privacy. Similarly, the balance between the diverse aims and priorities of competing constituencies can be difficult to maintain. Other authors, including Elizabeth Yakel and Rick Barry, explore ways in which technology can be employed to good effect. If users could interactively add to the knowledge base of archival websites, and if archivists themselves could link electronic sources of information to regular finding aids, richer and more accurate contextualization would result. David Bearman argues that there are clues implicit in the form of a textual document – typeface, spacing, indentation conventions, and so forth – and that these markers could suggest content, with the potential for text to be “read” electronically. Technology has created a blizzard of bytes for us to plough through but, as these authors suggest, it may also provide some solutions to the problem of volume.

The great glut of records, whether electronic or hard copy, is, of course, not the only issue with which archivists must cope. Neither is our struggle to describe and contextualize such records adequately, nor the strategizing we undertake before acquiring them. Sometimes the difficulty lies in convincing

4 Note here, as well, the contribution to description and contextualization made by Sam Kula, *Appraising Moving Images: Assessing the Archival and Monetary Value of Film and Video Records* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002). As he has said, most theorists of appraisal routinely ignore moving images.

our sponsors of our value. Gregory Sanford has written a charming account of his early days at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology working with Helen Samuels. Inspired by her “activist archivist” stance, he describes his later work in the Vermont State Archives and the measures undertaken there to encourage a better understanding of the nature and value of archival record-keeping. Proving our worth is mentioned as an ongoing challenge by several other authors in this book, but the challenge does not end there. It can be difficult to document society as a whole while simultaneously serving one’s own institution. The archivist is often caught in the classic ethnographer’s dilemma of being *in* but not *of* the world of the records creator. The unique demands of working as a professional archivist in a corporate archive are the focus of the Bruce Bruemmer article. Brien Brothman, too, refers to the dichotomy between public duty as citizen and private duty as employee. Verne Harris passionately describes his personal experiences of having to resist the demands of an oppressive political regime. Sometimes one’s own personal ethics must supersede any code of ethics or the imperatives of one’s sponsor.

The articles in *Controlling the Past* are of the highest calibre, and Terry Cook has achieved that most elusive of goals for an editor working with multiple authors: a book with thematic coherence and consistent quality. This volume makes a significant contribution to a core of essential professional literature. It will be a keystone of archival education and praxis, and is a fine and fitting tribute to the scholarship of Helen Willa Samuels.

**Bernadine Dodge**  
**University Archivist Emeritus**  
**Trent University**