

Donors and Donor Agency: Implications for Private Archives Theory and Practice¹



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RÉSUMÉ Les donateurs des fonds d'archives sont largement omis de nos écrits scientifiques, et pourtant pour plusieurs centres d'archives, les donateurs sont à la base de la constitution d'une collection riche et vivante. Bien que les archivistes aient une très grande expérience pratique avec les donateurs, il existe une lacune au niveau de la recherche et de la pensée critique à leur égard. Le rôle des donateurs mérite une plus grande place dans la recherche. Les donateurs ajoutent un élément dynamique aux processus archivistiques, en y apportant leurs valeurs, idées et intérêts. Examiner les donateurs par l'entremise du concept de l'agence, tel qu'énoncé par les sciences sociales, révèle qu'ils exercent une influence importante sur les fonctions de base de l'archivistique qui, dans nos modèles théoriques, sont généralement considérées comme étant le domaine exclusif des professionnels en archivistique. Les relations avec les donateurs sont négociées, peut-être même contestées, ce qui façonne ultimement les traces documentaires existantes de la société. Quelle est la portée des agents donateurs pour la pratique archivistique? Qu'est-ce qui motive les donateurs à offrir leur matériel aux archives? Comment l'interaction avec les donateurs influence l'environnement de l'acquisition et de l'évaluation? Comment devrait-on adapter les modèles archivistiques afin de mieux refléter la réalité des donateurs d'archives privées? Cet article examine les donateurs et les agents donateurs, revendiquant leur juste place dans la théorie archivistique.

- 1 This article evolved, through further research and revision, from the conference paper "Creating an Archival Mosaic," presented on 12 June 2009 at the conference Archives and the Canadian Narrative: Re/Telling Canada's Stories & Regional Archives in the Digital Universe, held at Mount Allison University, Sackville, New Brunswick. An abbreviated version of this article was presented at the Association of Canadian Archivists conference in Winnipeg, 13 June 2013, as "The Unknown Community: Donor Interaction and Engagement." The author wishes to thank the general editor of *Archivaria* and the anonymous reviewers, whose thoughtful comments did much to improve this article. He would also like to thank his colleagues, past and present, at Library and Archives Canada, who have shared their knowledge and experience with him, and have encouraged and influenced his thinking about donor relations.

ABSTRACT Donors of archival fonds are largely neglected in our professional literature, and yet for many archives, donors are essential to building a rich and vibrant collection. Though archivists have a wealth of practical experience with donors, there is a paucity of research and reflection about them. The role of donors deserves greater inquiry. Donors introduce a dynamic element to the archival process, bringing their own values, ideas, and interests. Examining donors through the concept of *agency*, as developed in the social sciences, reveals that they exercise significant influence on key archival functions, which in our theoretical models are generally treated as the sole purview of archival professionals. Donor relations are negotiated, perhaps even contested ground that ultimately shapes the surviving documentary record of society. What are the implications of donor agency for archival practice? What motivates donors to offer their material to an archives? How does donor interaction influence the acquisition and appraisal environment? How should we adapt archival models to reflect the reality of donors in private archives more accurately? This article explores donors and donor agency, arguing for their place in archival theory.

Introduction

Donors of archival fonds are largely absent from our professional discourse. While most archival thinking derives from our experience with government records, many publicly funded archives acquire and preserve private fonds, either as a core activity or to complement official records in a combined public and private archives environment. Donors thus play a role in the making of our collective memory, not just in the obvious sense as creators, but also as owners and keepers of documentary material, who consciously engage with archival institutions to negotiate the preservation of the material and its availability for public research. Donors are not necessarily passive agents; they pursue their own interests, perhaps with scant regard for the niceties of archival theory or tradition. The dynamic element introduced by the interaction between donor and archivist, in all its complexity, deserves inquiry and integration into existing archival thinking.

Recent archival writing is largely silent on the theoretical implications of donor-archivist interaction and engagement. Geoff Wexler and Linda Long, in their 2009 article on aging and dying donors, note the literature's practical bent, reporting that it mostly "focuses on the technicalities of donor relations, such as legal precautions, accurate recordkeeping, and appraisal of the materials on-site."² The conceptual place of donors in the archival endeavour has not

2 Geoff Wexler and Linda Long, "Lifetimes and Legacies: Mortality, Immortality, and the Needs of Aging and Dying Donors," *American Archivist* 72, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2009): 479. For this reason, and reasons of length, I have not included a detailed literature review. *Archivaria* and the *American Archivist* have published only a few articles on donor relations since the 1970s.

been the subject of investigation. Archivists do, however, have a rich body of unwritten, practical experience with donors from which to draw principles, which are sometimes embedded in procedures and manuals of practice, offering a hidden vein of experience to mine for theoretical insight.³

If we accept that archival theory and practice must be aligned, the collected wisdom of the profession expressed in these manuals provides a much firmer basis for theorizing than relying on personal experience or anecdotal evidence. Recent thinking about personal and literary archives also offers some insight for examining the place of donors.⁴ Indeed, my purpose here is not to advise on practical matters of donor relations, but rather to investigate the conceptual space occupied by donors and the implications for archival theory. Exploring the complementary and competing interests of donors and archivists will help forge more inclusive, dynamic, and open models that accord donors an active role in shaping archival memory.

Conceptualizing Donor Agency

Though we often use the terms “creator” and “donor” interchangeably, there are subtle but important differences in these roles, evident to most archivists, but which warrant review here for clarity of expression. “Creator” refers to the individual, family, or organization that creates and accumulates the archival material in question, while the “donor” is the individual, family, or organization that legally negotiates and transfers its ownership to the acquiring archives. Creators may become donors when they approach an archival institution with an offer of their documents or when they respond to an overture from an archivist.⁵

- 3 For some standard manuals of practice, see F. Gerald Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993), 36–50; the revised version of this manual, by Frank Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 75–120; and Jackie Bettington et al., *Keeping Archives*, 3rd ed. (Canberra: Australian Society of Archivists, 2008), 207–51. See also Virginia R. Stewart, “A Primer on Manuscript Field Work,” in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings in Archival Theory and Practice*, ed. Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1984), 124–38, reprinted from *Midwestern Archivist* 1, no. 2 (1976): 3–20. The collection *Papers Prepared for the 1975 Archives Course* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, Archives Section, 1975) offers the closest thing to a manual of practice in Canada. Though dated, its advice on donor relations captures well the attitudes and experiences derived from Canadian practice in the pre-digital era.
- 4 See, for example, Catherine Hobbs, “Reenvisioning the Personal: Reframing Traces of Individual Life,” in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 214–22.
- 5 Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 132. Pearce-Moses defines a donor as “an individual or organization who gives property or money to another without reciprocal compensation,”

Donation implies a change of legal ownership. The regular transfer of records from a corporate entity or government agency to an in-house archives or official custodian does not constitute donation as it generally involves only a change in custody or control, not ownership. The practical and theoretical implications of this distinction, as will be seen, are far-reaching for private archives. It must be remembered that although the creator and donor are often one and the same, they are not *necessarily* one and the same. Donors and creators have marked a diverging path in recent archival inquiry. Archivists and literary theorists have examined personal archiving through the creative impulse, but cast their gaze more sparingly upon the donor, which generally is considered an inquiry in the related and overlapping realm of *private* rather than *personal* archives.⁶

The social sciences and field of philosophy typically define “agency” as the capacity of individuals to act independently, to make independent choices, and to act on their own will and influence outcomes.⁷ Though agency is more complex in philosophy and social theory, in discussing and advancing the concept of donor agency, I am referring to the ability of donors to exert and promote their interests and influence archival practice. Bearing in mind this

adding that “in many instances, individuals who donate collections are not the provenance of the collection.” My discussion is limited to donors of documentary material.

- 6 By private archives, I refer to the acquisition of documentary material by an archival institution that is an entity separate from the creator, typically resulting in the formal acquisition of the fonds of private individuals, families, organizations, and businesses by public archives. Here, I have restricted my exploration of donor agency to individual donors for reasons of simplicity. Mark A. Greene refers to the broader “archival paradigm” and the narrower “recordkeeping paradigm,” which forms a part of the larger whole and whose advocates are attempting to have it subsume the broader archival paradigm; see Mark A. Greene, “The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age,” *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 43–45. In my conception, the private archives paradigm (perhaps the “manuscript” paradigm?) forms another subset of Greene’s broader archival paradigm. The dominant narrative of archival theory, however, follows the other paradigm, that of a records-creating government agency and an officially sanctioned state repository.
- 7 For an introduction to the concept of agency, see, for example, Bryan S. Turner, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Ted Honderich, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1984). In his influential work on agency and structure, Giddens discusses agency, or action, in the following terms: “To be able to ‘act otherwise’ means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs. This presumes that to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to ‘make a difference,’ that is, to exercise some sort of power.” My discussion of donor agency derives from this ability to *make a difference* in archival activity.

definition, we can tentatively identify three primary roles or spheres of agency in the private archives paradigm: creator, steward, and donor. The three roles can be combined in one person or spread over many generations; the roles can engage and interact simultaneously or evolve over many years in defined stages.⁸ The first role is perhaps the most familiar, reflecting the creation and active use of archival documents by a creator who first creates and accumulates them in the course of his or her activities and interests. The documents are kept – and perhaps culled and weeded, shaped and stored – by their current owner or keeper in his/her role as steward or custodian. The records may be added to, perhaps transforming a personal fonds into a family fonds. They may be rearranged and re-purposed (think of the insertion of a document into a scrapbook or the uploading of a photograph to a website) in a fashion that blurs the lines between creation and stewardship. The blurring of these lines does not negate the significance of the spheres or roles. The steward/owner may carefully plan for the transfer of the materials to another generation of stewards, bequeathed by legal instrument, or store them haphazardly for others to discover. Stewardship or custodianship does not necessarily imply care and concern for the documents; it simply implies ownership or possession, and ultimately destruction or transmission.

In the third role, or sphere, of agency, that of donor, the present owner or steward of the archival material develops archival consciousness, an awareness of the possibility of preserving the material in an archives – perhaps through personal experience and knowledge or initial contact with an archivist – and the potential ramifications of posterity. The shift from steward to donor may be subtle, with the donor slowly beginning to shape the documentary material for posterity in a gradual dawning of awareness of its archival potential. Donors reflect on the archival option and possibly engage with one or more archival institutions to discuss the donation or sale of their documentary material for long-term preservation and research.⁹ Some might argue in

8 A few archivists have conceptualized the personal archives paradigm in similar but subtly different fashions, reflecting their purposes, but they generally subsume the donor role under other roles. See Jennifer Meehan, "Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records," *Archivaria* 70 (Fall 2010): 27–44; and Jordan Bass, "A PIM Perspective: Leveraging Personal Information Management Research in the Archiving of Personal Digital Records," *Archivaria* 75 (Spring 2013): 49–76. Meehan identifies creators, custodians, and archivists: "Differences include the ways in which records are created, used, and maintained initially and over time by the creator (personal recordkeeping); the ways in which records are used, maintained, and transmitted by subsequent custodians (custodial history); and the ways in which records are treated once in archival custody, even before being formally processed (archival intervention)" (p. 32). Bass discusses the "creation, recordkeeping, appraisal, and preservation of personal documentary forms" (p. 53) in the precustodial environment, observing that they are compartmentalized as a single epoch (creation) in traditional life cycle and continuum models.

9 For the sake of simplicity, I am treating vendors conceptually as a subset of donors, but

legalistic terms that a donor only becomes a donor after a formal donation is made, but our professional usage of the term is traditionally broader, also including prospective and potential donors. Jordan Bass, in his thoughtful review and analysis of the implications of Personal Information Management (PIM) research for personal archives, has collectively termed these roles the “pre-custodial environment.”¹⁰ This is a useful description of these roles from an archival perspective, but it does have the disadvantage of implying that there will be a custodial phase of archival mediation when, in fact, the long-term fate of private documents rests primarily in the hands of stewards and donors. In order to distinguish between the pre-custodial and archival environments, perhaps it would be better to refer to them as the private and public spheres or environments. Private and public also accurately portray both the change in ownership and the change in accessibility that occur when the documentary material is acquired by a public archives.¹¹

These three roles, or spheres, of agency are not exclusive; one person can be creator, steward, and donor, or several persons can fulfill each of these roles, perhaps over several generations in the case of a complex family fonds. Nor are they necessarily sequential; a person can act in all three roles at the same time, as someone might who, while in the process of creating and keeping a document, is conscious that it will be archival and available to posterity for research. My purpose in identifying and attempting to define these roles is not to create a definitive taxonomy or model, but rather to carve out a niche for donors in our thinking, to create a conceptual space where we can explore the implications of donors in relation to other forms of agency. What is significant is that, in these related spheres of agency or roles, the creator-steward-donor shapes the surviving documentary record, before and during archival engagement, thus shaping the enduring evidence of our society.

Much of our scholarship on personal archives, so far, has examined the role of creator, but ground-breaking interpretations of original order by Heather MacNeil, Jennifer Douglas, and Jennifer Meehan have also explored

naturally the purchase or sale of archival documents invokes a host of other mechanisms and motivations. Sellers are more narrowly focused on price and perhaps more willing to “shop around” for the best price. Sale of materials might take place through an auction or consignment to a dealer or an agent. Sometimes donors wish to sell one part of the fonds but are willing to donate the remainder. A close relative of the donor might deposit documentary material in an archives but retain physical ownership of it (a scenario that I am studiously ignoring for the purposes of this discussion). These arrangements, generally formalized through some form of agreement, appear to have been more common in the past but are generally discouraged today.

10 Bass, “A PIM Perspective,” 52–54.

11 A post-custodial approach for private fonds would introduce some flexibility into this discussion, but the private and public distinction would likely still apply in some form to both ownership and accessibility.

what the stewardship or custodial role means for original order, arrangement, and archival mediation.¹² MacNeil has coined the term “custodial bond” to refer to the interventions of various custodial agents over time, and the word “archivalterity” to refer “to the acts of continuous and discontinuous change that transform the meaning and authenticity of a fonds as it is transmitted over time and space.”¹³ Meehan remarks that “the creator’s intentions and activities are not the only ones at play in the formation of a body of records. The custodians of a fonds – friends, family, executors – oftentimes play a significant role in shaping the fonds as a whole,” and Meehan urges archivists to understand this contextual history better and make it accessible to users.¹⁴

But between creation and stewardship of the documentary material on the one hand and archival custody and mediation on the other lies the neglected borderland of donation. This borderland is not neutral; as Catherine Hobbs has observed, many “donors have a deep emotional investment in their records.”¹⁵ Archivists engage and interact with individuals primarily in the charged environment of the donor role. When the interests of both coincide, the documentary material that lays the foundation of societal memory emerges from this crucible of agency for long-term preservation and access. The following discussion examines in turn the place of donors in our conceptual models and how their agency influences archival acquisition and appraisal.

Adapting Archival Models to Admit Donor Agency

Donors are a poor fit in overarching or universal theories of archives, which, reflecting the prevailing modernism of the twentieth century, are traditionally built upon stable, institutional models characterized by responsible custodians, rational processes, and orderly transfers of records.¹⁶ In such theories, archivists control the development and application of archival functions in a structured world – where the dynamic, unpredictable element of external agency is absent. It is easier to construct models that ignore elements beyond our control. Appraisal theory presumes that which is being appraised, whether records or functions, submits peaceably to the appraisal process, and abides by its dictates. The archival paradigm is often conceptualized as a life cycle,

12 See, for example, Heather MacNeil, “Archivalterity: Rethinking Original Order,” *Archivaria* 66 (Fall 2008): 1–24; Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil, “Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers’ Archives,” *Archivaria* 67 (Spring 2009): 25–39; and Meehan, “Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records,” 27–44.

13 MacNeil, “Archivalterity,” 14.

14 Meehan, “Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records,” 40–41.

15 Catherine Hobbs, “The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals,” *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 133.

16 Terry Cook, “What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1997): 22–25, 45.

in which records move logically from one stage of life to the next, or a continuum, in which records move seamlessly along a linear path toward their destiny. In these closed systems, the mutual roles and responsibilities of creating agencies, records managers, and archivists are defined by legislation and mandate. Both models imply a rational or logical movement that is often missing from private archives.¹⁷

Gerald Ham suggests that private archives follow a life cycle, “though usually in a less controlled and organized way.”¹⁸ But this involves stretching or straining the model or metaphor to the breaking point. From the perspective of the donor, their archival material does not necessarily follow any preset cycle or trajectory that leads inevitably or seamlessly toward archival preservation or even appraisal by an archivist. There is no natural evolution; its eventual fate is undefined, unwritten, or open-ended. It may move along a cycle or continuum but not in any structured or rational way. Jordan Bass, influenced by Tom Nesmith’s ideas of provenance, has found that these models are inadequate for personal digital archives, because they compress and oversimplify the precustodial environment: “As a result, precustodial creation, recordkeeping, appraisal, and preservation of personal documentary forms are compartmentalized as a single epoch (creation) in a finite series of temporal and spatial businesslike progressions (maintenance, scheduling,

- 17 For the best discussion of these concepts, see Glenn Dingwall, “Life Cycle and Continuum: A View of Recordkeeping Models from the Postwar Era,” in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 139–61. See also Jay Atherton, “From Life Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management–Archives Relationship,” in *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*, ed. Tom Nesmith (Metuchen, NJ, 1993), 391–402; Sue McKemmish, “Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice,” *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 333–59; and Barbara Reed, “Reading the Records Continuum: Interpretations and Explorations,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 33, no. 1 (May 2005): 18–43. I am, of course, oversimplifying both life cycle theory and records continuum theory, but these models, in their conception, are closed or presuppose the inclusion of the records creator, not allowing for external actors to have an impact on them. Here, I am referring to the seamless, linear records continuum, in its original and more recognizable formulation. As Glenn Dingwall remarks, even the continuum model as it exists in the publications of the Australian archival community “is at its heart a linear model” (p. 150). However, in more recent iterations of records continuum theory, as developed by Frank Upward, Sue McKemmish, and others of the Australian school, the continuum has evolved into an elastic and multi-dimensional model, its original linear form scarcely recognizable, with four dimensions (create, capture, organise, pluralise) and multiple axes, or vectors. As Barbara Reed asserts, “The records continuum theory and model is not a straightjacket for linear application of records theory within a government arena” (p. 41); she insists on its wider applicability in a form that is “vibrant and dynamic” (p. 41). McKemmish, in her explication of records continuum theory, also recognizes the inadequacy of all such models, which “can only ever represent a partial view of the dynamic, complex, and multi-dimensional nature of records, and their rich webs of contextual and documentary relationships” (p. 354).
- 18 Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 39.

and disposition) leading to the record's eventual mediation by archivists."¹⁹ Drawing on insights from postmodernism, Nesmith urges the "reconceptualization of archiving," which "should be seen as an ongoing process or action," and he remarks that, "by comparison, traditional conceptions of records and archives reflect more finite analyses which terminate fairly quickly in certain simple actions and statements."²⁰

Donors of private archives exist beyond the closed system of records creator and official custodian, not just in the obvious sense that they are not government agencies, but also in the absence of a formal one-to-one mandated relationship between creator and archives. Donations may be offered and then withdrawn, offered to another archives and then withdrawn, or sold to a private collector. Or they may simply disappear from view for decades until discovered anew. To stretch these metaphors further, the change of ownership effected by donation to an archives better reflects a break in the continuum; it is an atypical, extraordinary event in the life of a document. Such models, based on corporate recordkeeping, appear unequal to the unlimited possibilities or multitudinous fates that may befall private archives. Relationships that are undefined challenge our carefully constructed environment, threatening the modernist impetus to define, organize, and rationalize. As Mark A. Greene observes, the archival paradigm outside the limits of institutional recordkeeping is "chaotic and messy." In advocating a broad, sweeping cultural mission for archives, Greene bemoans the recent efforts of archival theorists "to make orderly and rational what is an inherently disorderly and arational (if not irrational) universe of documentation, memory, evidence, and culture."²¹

Donors introduce a dynamic element into the private archives paradigm. Archivists do not act in a vacuum when they appraise private fonds. Donors react to archivists' overtures and pursue their own varied interests, unconstrained by our policies, mandates, or regulatory frameworks. In preserving the personal digital fonds of British politicians as part of the Paradigm Project, Susan Thomas and Janette Martin have found that "working with the creators of personal archives is entirely different: it entails working with a host of diverse people, cultures, and systems. We collect material which individuals have no obligation to give us; we cannot impose standards governing the creation, management, and disposition of personal archives. We can advise potential donors, but ultimately we cannot compel anyone to follow any recommendation we might make."²² As Bettington et al. observe quite simply

19 Bass, "A PIM Perspective," 53.

20 Tom Nesmith, "Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice," *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005): 261.

21 Greene, "The Power of Meaning," 45, 54.

22 Susan Thomas and Janette Martin, "Using the Papers of Contemporary British Politicians as a Testbed for the Preservation of Digital Personal Archives," *Journal of the Society of*

in the Australian manual *Keeping Archives*, for private archives “the acquisition process is considerably more complex” than for institutional archives.²³

Donors, as owners of the record, ultimately determine its fate. With every donation of a private fonds to an archival institution, a change of ownership occurs; a contract, written or unwritten, is established between two willing parties, each pursuing its own interests, which have aligned at a moment in time for a shared purpose. Through this negotiated, perhaps even contested interaction, archivists and donors construct the documentary foundation upon which societal memory stands.

Archival Consciousness and Donor Motivation

If we accept that acquisition does not occur in a vacuum and that donor agency influences archival practice, we might ask what motivates donors to give their personal and private material to a public archives? The presence of archival consciousness is a necessary precondition of a donor’s approach to an archives or response to an approach from an archivist, but the psychology of why donors wish to archive their fonds is difficult to answer and can be as individual as the donor in question. To date, more professional effort has been devoted to understanding the act or process of creating, and the rich and varied meanings that underlie personal recordkeeping.²⁴ But what of the mental shift from the personal creating, using, and keeping of documents to their archiving and permanent preservation for public access? What develops and drives the personal impulse of donors to offer their documentary material to an archives for research?

Prospective donors have moved from personal utility and memory to archival consciousness and active engagement with an archival institution. Whereas many donors never move beyond mere archival consciousness – the basic awareness of the archival option – some begin to perceive the advantages, benefits, or necessity of preserving their documentary material in an archival institution for posterity. Though not exhaustive, the following list outlines some of the psychological influences and other factors that motivate donors to engage and interact with an archives:

1) *Ego*. A profound belief in the importance or value of their life and work; a desire for posthumous recognition; or a fear that their contributions might be lost or neglected if not preserved in an archives. Archival preservation is

Archivists 27, no. 1 (April 2006): 36.

23 Bettington et al., *Keeping Archives*, 207.

24 Some recent explorations of the psychology of personal creating and keeping include Bass, “A PIM Perspective,” 54–67; and Hobbs, “Reenvisioning the Personal,” 222–31.

perhaps seen as an endorsement or recognition of their historical significance. Barbara Kaiser points to “ego satisfaction” as a key motivation of donors. But Barbara Craig remarks that, in a broader and more positive sense, “It is human to want to leave a record of ourselves to tell the future – once, we were here too!”²⁵

2) *Commemoration and memory.* A desire to ensure that someone is remembered, or memorialized, beyond death. Donors may simply wish to mark significant milestones in the life of an individual. Wexler and Long identify the importance of ritual: “Retirement from a career, completion of significant work or a project, the centennial of an organization, the sale of a long-term business, the death of an individual – ritual often accompanies these events, including the preservation of records, papers, and artifacts.” The identification and collection of materials for donation to an archives becomes part of the celebration, of marking or memorializing the event. Special projects like a biography, a memoir, or an oral history interview might result in a donation of archival material – an act that “connects the history of the individual or organization with the larger storehouse of recorded knowledge embodied in the repository.”²⁶

3) *Advocacy.* A desire to put their side of the story of contested events on the record for all time. Donors may have challenged political or social elites in protest or in print, engaged in prolonged litigation, or witnessed or participated in controversial events. Whether they failed or succeeded in these efforts, archival preservation can be a means of historical vindication. It may simply ensure that their side of the story is on record for posterity and is available for research use more widely. This can be a powerful motivation for social activists; their archives can be a counterpoint to the state-sanctioned official record.

4) *Physical space.* The desire to clear space without making the difficult decision to destroy material is a common impetus for an archival donation. Space is more often a motivating factor when the donor has little emotional connection to the documentary material on offer. As Wexler and Long observe, “Archivists often receive calls from friends or neighbors in the process of helping single elderly people move from long-time homes to assisted care facilities. ‘We don’t know what to do with all this stuff,’ they say, ‘there’s nobody to give it to.’”²⁷ But this reaction, surprisingly, might also come from the family of a

25 Barbara J. Kaiser, “Problems with Donors of Contemporary Collections,” *American Archivist* 32, no. 2 (April 1969): 103; and Barbara Craig, *Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice* (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2004), 11.

26 Wexler and Long, “Lifetimes and Legacies,” 483.

27 *Ibid.*, 485; and Stewart, “A Primer on Manuscript Field Work,” 131.

deceased creator who is not interested in or wishes to forget these documentary traces. Downsizing from the family home often results in a last-minute call to an archivist. This may emerge as a growing motivation for donations of digital archives, as donors grapple with the documentary remains left behind on the hard drives of loved ones.

5) *Financial benefit*. Some donors are motivated by the promise of a tax credit or cash for purchase; sometimes it is their primary interest. Certainly the more archives-aware creators – such as writers, photographers, and artists, and in general those who freelance for a living – are aware of the monetary potential of their archival material. Such donors may actively promote and market their fonds for archival consumption.²⁸ JoAnn McCaig has observed that, “for many Canadian authors, the sale of papers to an archive can generate more income than the proceeds from their published work.”²⁹ Archivists might find that donations are more frequent, with shorter intervals between accruals, when there is a monetary motivation. Income from artistic works and commissions is generally not taxed at source, so receipts for donations of archival material can offer a tax shelter. Kaiser comments that for “many donors the possibility of taking a tax deduction for a gift of manuscripts is the most persuasive argument,” but she acknowledges that this impulse is not incompatible with other motivations.³⁰

Donors are by nature diverse, so it is difficult to generalize about their motivations, and multiple motivations might be at play. Much depends, of course, on the mission and collecting mandate of the archives when it comes to what sorts of donors it will attract. But there are some communities with which archivists deal more often, and different issues arise specific to these groups. Some core communities, in an admittedly arbitrary selection, include writers, artists, politicians, veterans, university scholars, and genealogists. There is a small but growing body of literature for some of these specific communities.³¹

28 Maryanne Dever, “Reading Other People’s Mail,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 24 (May 1996): 119. Dever’s observation that “contemporary writers are ensuring their place in Australian letters by lodging their papers in public collections with unseemly zeal” is perhaps true in other English-speaking countries. See also Douglas and MacNeil, “Arranging the Self,” 38.

29 JoAnn McCaig, *Reading In: Alice Munro’s Archive* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 15.

30 Kaiser, “Problems with Donors,” 106. See also Stewart, “A Primer on Manuscript Field Work,” 133.

31 Archival literature that exists for some specific creator communities also offers insight for donor psychology. For example, for literary archives, see Catherine Hobbs, “New Approaches to Canadian Literary Archives,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 40 (Spring 2006): 114; and Douglas and MacNeil, “Arranging the Self,” 25–39. For university faculty, see Tara Zachary Laver, “In a Class by Themselves: Faculty Papers at Research University Archives

When a prospective donor has moved beyond archival consciousness and is willing to donate a fonds for permanent preservation, what factors influence the choice of an archives? What motivates the person to contact one archives rather than another, besides mere awareness of its existence? In many cases, there are multiple options. As Virginia Stewart cautions, an archivist, when educating donors about the value of their records and raising their archival consciousness, might well precipitate “the choice of another repository” for their fonds, and they should be prepared to accept this eventuality.³² Preserving a fonds in what archivists think is the most “appropriate” repository is not necessarily high on the donor’s list of priorities. Some donors may even attempt to play two or more archives off against each other to secure the most favourable terms. Donor agency, as such, is sometimes perceived as a threat to efforts to construct more rational and collaborative models of partnership among archival institutions.³³ Some of the major factors that can influence donors in their engagement of the archival system and selection of an “archival home” include the following:

- 1) *Proximity*. The donor may prefer an archives close to home, so that it is convenient to deal with the archivist, meeting face to face as the need arises, and so that it is possible to have access to the documents on an ongoing basis. Many donors want to feel that their personal archives are preserved within their community, that their story is part of their community’s story.
- 2) *Prestige*. The prestige of the institution may be an issue. The donor might believe that a local archives is less important than a national archives, or an old university is more prestigious than a new institution. The donor sometimes perceives the archival institution’s significance or reputation as a judgment on the creator’s impact or importance.
- 3) *Quality of care*. Donors may prefer the institution that will give their documents the best care, undertake the most conservation work, or promise to keep the greatest share of their archival material. An archivist who warns

and Manuscript Repositories,” *American Archivist* 66, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2003): 159–96; Frances Fournier, “‘For They Would Gladly Learn and Gladly Teach’ – University Faculty and Their Papers: A Challenge for Archivists,” *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992): 58–74; and Tom Hyry, Diane Kaplan, and Christine Weideman, “Though this be madness, yet there is method in ’t’: Assessing the Value of Faculty Papers and Defining a Collecting Policy,” *American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002): 55–69.

32 Stewart, “A Primer on Manuscript Field Work,” 132.

33 Consultative Group on Canadian Archives, *Canadian Archives: Report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada* (Ottawa: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1980), 87. This report is generally known as the “Wilson Report,” after group chair Ian E. Wilson.

that extensive culling of the fonds will be required or who expresses interest in only one series of records may deter a donor who wishes the fonds to be preserved *en bloc*. An inflexible collecting policy or a rigid interpretation of an acquisition mandate might prompt a prospective donor to find a more accommodating repository, one that respects the integrity of the whole fonds and is willing to invest time and effort in its preservation. Donors who do research in a particular archives will certainly form an impression of the quality of care given to its collections.

4) *Peer community*. Creators who move in circles that interact frequently, such as writers, artists, and journalists, or who belong to an ethnocultural community are often influenced by the recommendations of their peers. The archival awareness of literary and artistic communities derives much from peer communication in fields that have long been cultivated by archivists. A positive donor experience will translate into further offers from their community or other related creators. Moreover, as Ham has remarked, from the perspective of the acquiring archivist, “established donors are knowledgeable about and often acquainted with important persons or organizations in their field. Donors are an excellent source of leads, particularly to collections related to their own.”³⁴ Archival institutions benefit greatly from such connections, which can support the development of a rich collection in a specific subject or field. Positive donor experiences will also result in approaches from peers through word of mouth.

5) *Trust or distrust*. The relationship with an archives or archivist will also influence a prospective donor. A positive or negative experience as a researcher in an institution can certainly tip the balance for or against it. An archivist without sufficient knowledge of the subject matter or respect for the creator’s achievements will set off warning bells. As Ham cautions, “It is critical that archivists establish their competence and credibility. They must have the donor’s trust.”³⁵ Likewise R.J. Taylor remarks that many “acquisitions are initially promoted by the rapport which develops between a specific archivist and the donor.”³⁶ Trust is essential to build donor confidence in the archivist’s ability, including the resolve to keep sensitive material confidential, to protect family secrets, and to ensure copyright is respected. It is a concern that, as discussed below, keeps untold numbers of fonds from ever being offered to

34 Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 39. On the subject of donors as a source of leads, see also Frank G. Burke, *Research and the Manuscript Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 83–84.

35 Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 45.

36 R.J. Taylor, “Acquisition of Manuscripts: A Discussion of the Purpose, Methods and Conditions of Acquisition,” in *The Papers Prepared for the 1975 Archives Course*, 32–36.

an archives, increasingly so in the digital age. University of Oregon archivist Linda Long describes how a relationship of trust developed between her and the artist and activist Tee Corinne over the course of a decade: “In a combined professional relationship and friendship, we were able to develop trust in each other. I believe this trust was core to Tee’s desire to leave her entire estate to Special Collections and University Archives.”³⁷ Donors often come to view the archivist as the guardian of their personal legacy. Trust can be the factor that determines whether records go into the dustbin or into an archival repository, but close relationships with donors can also challenge our objectivity and raise ethical issues.

There are undoubtedly other factors that influence donors when selecting an archives, and their ultimate decision might be an amalgam of these factors. Time may be on their side. If they do not form a favourable impression of a given archives or archivist, they might wait several years before engaging the archival community again. But time may be against them if they have only a few weeks to move from their house and clear out the closets and basement. Such examples are evidence of the wide range of considerations that can motivate prospective donors to engage the archival community and initiate or engage in the process of preserving a private fonds in a public archives. This is only a preliminary discussion, and more research is required to better understand donor psychology. Formal surveys of donors would help refine our understanding of their motivation, archival knowledge, and experience of archival interaction. Developing archival consciousness – an awareness of the possibility of preservation in a memory institution – is but the first step in donor-archivist engagement, which, if the interests are aligned, helps construct our societal memory.

Agency in Acquisition: The Challenge of Donor Reluctance and the Paradox of Proactive Acquisition

Turning from donor motivation to actual engagement with archival institutions, how does donor agency influence the acquisition process? Archival practitioners have long been familiar with the reality of donor agency. Through this distilled experience, we can explore donor interaction and compare it with more abstract ideas to determine whether it confirms or contradicts them, or whether it suggests ways in which such ideas should be adapted. Though the subsequent analysis might create the impression that relations with donors are fraught with peril, such is not always the case. In fact, they are often quite friendly and develop without difficulty. Based on long experience in

37 Wexler and Long, “Lifetimes and Legacies,” 488.

American archives, Frank Burke observes that, depending on circumstances, “negotiations for papers can be delicate in some cases, and very businesslike in others.”³⁸ But theoretical concepts and overarching frameworks must be constructed to accommodate all or at least most cases, not just the routine or simple ones. Unique and unusual circumstances arise naturally when engaging with individuals who are as varied and diverse as society itself.

In her pioneering article on donor relations, Barbara Kaiser addresses many of these circumstances, identifying these challenges explicitly in the title, “Problems with Donors of Contemporary Collections.” Her clear and concise explanations will ring true with those who have confronted these very challenges, some of which have changed little in forty years. (Indeed, such issues appear almost structural when considered in light of their continuing relevance today). She identifies, in particular, the desire of donors to request special treatment from archives; to have input on selection and appraisal decisions; to withhold or impose access restrictions to sensitive material; and to maximize the value of tax credits. These issues all pose challenges to our professional practice. Kaiser’s exposition of them is naturally viewed from the perspective of the archivist, but might they also reflect the donor’s valid needs, values, and interests? From this perspective, “Problems with Donors” might well be titled “Problems with Archivists.” Such insights point to the various interests at play during a negotiation.³⁹

Like Kaiser, Virginia Stewart, in her influential primer on manuscript fieldwork, also refers to donors who “withhold” personal or sensitive documents.⁴⁰ Both authors, by using this value-laden term, suggest that archival purposes supersede what might well be legitimate donor concerns. It is the donors who own the material in question – donating it is their choice; it is their property. As Dever, Newman and Vickery point out, donors exercise the “prerogative of property.” This prerogative confers upon them the right to dispose of their material as they see fit. Archivists cannot compel individuals to donate their fonds; donors will do so only if they perceive it is in their interest – emotional, psychological, or financial.⁴¹

The Consultative Group on Canadian Archives grappled a few years later with the place of donor interests in the development of a national archival network. In its landmark 1980 report, the group recognized that the archival system could not impose its will on donors, observing that “no matter how systematic or rationalized archives may become, the right of individuals and families to dispose of their personal documents as they see fit must be

38 Burke, *Research and the Manuscript Tradition*, 77.

39 Kaiser, “Problems with Donors,” 103–7.

40 Stewart, “A Primer on Manuscript Field Work,” 132.

41 Dever, Newman, and Vickery, *The Intimate Archive*, 16.

respected. Although the archives system may see a particular repository as the 'appropriate' one for the material, the donor may have other loyalties." Still, the group perceived this persistence of donor agency as a challenge or a threat, lamenting the growth of a marketplace for archives: "archival materials should not be sold on an open market." But how did the authors of the report reconcile this moral critique of the marketplace with their own endorsement of the right of individuals "to dispose of their personal documents as they see fit"? This tension between the demands of a rational and collaborative archival system and the property rights or interests of donors is still not easily resolved.⁴²

Most donors, when approached, will not wish to archive their fonds, or, perhaps more precisely, will not be ready to consent to its donation. When there has been no previous relationship with a donor or expression of interest on his part, an approach by an archivist typically meets with silence, or perhaps a polite but noncommittal response. Gerald Ham, in the Society of American Archivists (SAA) manual on selection and appraisal, remarks on the potential negative psychological impact on a donor of such an inquiry: "Some people react to a request for their records as they would to one asking them to arrange for their own funeral."⁴³ Much thinking about private archives acquisition, when developed without the benefit of experience, underestimates the impact of this reluctance and approaches acquisition purely as an intellectual exercise of appraisal, of identifying the best material. But unsolicited archival approaches will surprise unprepared donors. The prospective donor needs time to think, time to assimilate what archiving his documents might mean personally, what it might mean to surrender custody and control and allow public access to what was formerly most private and personal. If the donor has never before considered the possibility of placement in an archives, it may lead to the dawning of an archival consciousness.

Although there are great variations among archives in terms of mandate and resources, practical experience generally shows that proactively identifying and contacting individuals and organizations has a relatively low success rate in terms of finalized acquisitions – at least in the short term. As Ham observes, "Though an initial letter is a necessary first step, the probability is high that the repository will not receive a response much less an accession."⁴⁴

42 Consultative Group on Canadian Archives, *Canadian Archives*, 7, 87–90.

43 Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 43. See also Burke, *Research and the Manuscript Tradition*. Burke sketches out an ideal scenario but warns, "Of course, all of the above is 'textbook,' and things rarely happen according to that infamous model" (p. 83).

44 Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 40. Ham's experience reflects my own over nearly twenty years, but quantifiable data is scarce. It must be admitted that results would vary greatly from institution to institution depending on both the size and scope of the mandate of the institution and the resources available to fulfill its mandate. In recent years, the Political Archives section at Library and Archives Canada has conducted a campaign after each federal election to contact politicians leaving political life (primarily

Virginia Stewart, in her advice on donor relations, cautions that “the initial overture to a donor may produce no response.... Securing the opportunity to meet with the donor is often the single most difficult step in a negotiation.”⁴⁵ J.H. Hodson, in a British manual, advises archivists to adopt an indirect approach through second or third parties, cautioning that “a frontal onslaught out of the blue, like a circular to a business firm, or a letter to an owner the archivist has not met, is usually no use at all.”⁴⁶ Pursuing creators of interest translates into relatively few immediate archival acquisitions.

Why are most potential donors initially indifferent or reluctant? Timing is important. Donors might be using their material actively and are therefore not willing to donate it while they are still working and creating. There is also a finality to donation; it is easier to defer making a decision to keep their options open. Acquisition strategies will more closely resemble ideal wish lists than concrete work plans. Proactively contacting creators can plant the seed that grows into a donation years down the road, but that is a strategic consideration. Donors, particularly those solicited by an archives without a prior expression of interest on their part, proceed cautiously. Most will not be interested in donating, and if we undertake to canvass potential donors widely, we cannot predict which few will respond positively to our overtures. The paradox of proactively contacting high-priority creators for acquisition is that the archives will end up waiting – perhaps for several years – inactive, until the donor is amenable.⁴⁷

Uncertainty is the watchword of private archives. Frank Burke states that “acquisition policies in manuscript collecting are fraught with uncertainties.”⁴⁸ In *Keeping Archives*, Bettington et al. assert that “no matter how well defined

cabinet ministers) to offer a deposit service for storing their records after they vacate their offices. The 2011 campaign achieved considerable success: 48 percent of targeted politicians deposited their records with LAC, but in 2008 only 14 percent of politicians contacted deposited records. Admittedly, federal cabinet ministers are not the most representative set of donors, having to vacate their offices on short notice and having paid staff to assist them in preparing records; nor do these deposits necessarily translate into donated archival fonds. Source: Lisa Tremblay-Goodyer, “Eureka! Federal Election 2011: A Moment in Archival History,” a paper presented at the 2012 Association of Canadian Archivists conference in Whitehorse, 7–9 June 2012 (unpublished).

45 Stewart, “A Primer on Manuscript Field Work,” 128–29.

46 J.H. Hodson, *The Administration of Archives 15, International Series of Monographs in Library and Information Science* (Oxford and New York: Pergamon Press, 1972), 81.

47 Library and Archives Canada, for example, still receives offers from donors contacted originally in the 1970s, during the initial phase of the Systematic National Acquisition Program. Pride of place in this regard goes to the Lord Elgin Collection, acquired in 2010, one hundred years after Dominion Archivist Sir Arthur Doughty had originally contacted the family in 1910; see Library and Archives Canada, Discover the Collection, “Politics and Government: Prime Ministers and Governors, Lord Elgin Collection (R977),” <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/prime-ministers/lord-elgin/Pages/lord-elgin-collection.aspx>.

48 Burke, *Research and the Manuscript Tradition*, 68.

your collecting policy may be, it will be impossible for a collecting archives to plan accessioning activity in the same way that an in-house archives can, because of the range of circumstances that can trigger an offer of material to your archives.⁴⁹ Similarly, in the revised version of the SAA manual on selection and appraisal, Frank Boles warns that the uncertainty of private archives “makes planning a less certain exercise,” because “the collecting archivist can never really be sure whence the next item will come, or even if there will be another document. Unlike his or her institutional peer, the collecting archivist always labors in an ambiguous documentary universe.”⁵⁰

Still, ambiguity is not an excuse for inactivity; nor is acquisition planning a hopeless exercise. Archivists must research the acquisition areas covered by their institutional mandate, develop collecting policies or documentation strategies, and generally know who is likely to have the fonds of most interest or value for their collection.⁵¹ Identifying potential donors and evaluating priorities for acquisition are essential activities in private archives. But policies and strategies must allow for the decisive impact of donor agency on the institution’s ability to fulfill its mandate. Professional thinking about private archives in recent years has emphasized the importance of planned collecting policies and collaborative strategies. Most notably, Helen Samuels and others developed and promoted documentation strategy, both in a multi-institution context and as a single institution methodology.⁵² Unfortunately, such laudable efforts to rationalize private acquisition have tended to understate the impact of donor interests on their potential success. Documentation strategy, in

49 Bettington et al., *Keeping Archives*, 244.

50 Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 65.

51 Craig, *Archival Appraisal*, 42–45; Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 64–73; and Bettington et al., *Keeping Archives*, 208–16. Craig, Boles, and Bettington all discuss the crucial role of the institutional mandates and collecting policies in guiding appraisal and acquisition activity for private archives, but devote less attention to the question of available resources, which act as a check on fulfilling these mandates. How much do we invest in proactive efforts that will bear little archival fruit in the short to medium term, knowing that resources used thusly are diverted from acquiring other fonds, processing backlogs, and other demands?

52 See, for example, Helen Willa Samuels, “Who Controls the Past,” *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 109–24; Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, “The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study,” *American Archivist* 50, no. 1 (Winter 1987): 12–47; Terry Abraham, “Collection Policy or Documentation Strategy: Theory and Practice,” *American Archivist* 54, no. 1 (Winter 1991): 44–52; Timothy L. Ericson, “At the Rim of Creative Dissatisfaction: Archivists and Acquisition Development,” *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–1992): 66–76; Helen Willa Samuels, “Improving Our Disposition: Documentation Strategy,” *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–1992): 125–40; Judi Cumming, “Beyond Intrinsic Value Towards the Development of Acquisition Strategies in the Private Sector: The Experience of the Manuscript Division, National Archives of Canada,” *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994): 232–39; and Mark A. Greene, “‘The Surest Proof’: A Utilitarian Approach to Appraisal,” *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998): 128–69.

theory, calls for early collaboration with records creators. Those without practical experience in private acquisition often presume that donors, when identified as priorities for acquisition by an archives, will readily accede to archival advances. As Frank Burke warns, “Establishing an acquisition policy can be relatively easy: implementing it can be extremely difficult.”⁵³

Though proactive efforts to identify priorities for acquisition are important, an archival institution can never be certain that it will acquire any given private fonds in any year, without a prior expression of interest on the donor’s part. Acquisition cases are frequently left open for years, awaiting resolution. (Ham observes that negotiations will often “stall or be plagued by indecision,” while Stewart advises patience in such situations, to avoid “forcing the issue ... at all costs”).⁵⁴ Donor relations offer a challenge to the realization of systematic planned approaches to acquisition; a challenge that might make low short-term success rates difficult to explain to non-archivist managers and stakeholders, who might understandably inquire why plans have not been fulfilled.

Still, if the donors identified as priorities are not willing to donate their materials, there are many others who are interested, at any given moment in time, in archiving their fonds for public research. They contact the archives with documentary material that is possibly new to the archivist but often no less relevant to the institutional mandate, or is at least worthy of evaluation. The archival reality is that many completed acquisitions are initiated by donors who engage the archives to pursue a solution for the documents in their possession. According to Bettington et al., “It may be a death in the family, a retirement, a sea-change or downsizing, a company takeover, a bankruptcy, or just a spring-clean” that prompts a donor to contact the archives.⁵⁵

Such unsolicited offers point to a tension in our professional identity: accepting these offers opens us up to charges of being passive or reactive. Subconsciously, we may believe that acknowledging donor agency diminishes our agency. Understandably, we wish to define our efforts as proactive, to be the drivers of the archival endeavour. Responding to or accepting unsolicited offers of documentary material may be viewed as bad practice by those who are not familiar with the relatively low success rate of proactive approaches. Indeed, an early advocate of documentation strategy described American acquisition effort as “highly reactive and incremental; it is generally passive

53 Burke, *Research and the Manuscript Tradition*, 76. See also Doris J. Malkmus, “Documentation Strategy: Mastodon or Retro-Success?” *American Archivist* 71, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2008): 384–409. Malkmus discusses some of the challenges faced when implementing documentation strategy in a multi-institutional context.

54 Stewart, “A Primer on Manuscript Field Work,” 131. See also Hodson, *The Administration of Archives*, 81–82; and Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 45.

55 Bettington et al., *Keeping Archives*, 244.

in its approach to influencing records creators and others.”⁵⁶ Barbara Craig neatly expresses the current disfavour of “passivity in acquisitions and reactive appraisal,” which “should be countenanced only within the framework of an active process of appraisal and acquisition.” Noting this trend in recent writing on appraisal, Craig observes that “it is now more common for archives to define their mandates in active pursuit of acquisitions driven in large part by appraisal that is systematic and phased.”⁵⁷ While this is proper policy, experienced archival practitioners know that it will seldom reflect the reality of donor relations, during which considerable effort is required to react and respond to donor initiatives. The professional ideal of making only proactive acquisitions will often founder on the shoals of the indifference or reluctance of priority donors.

Recent archival writing has thus subconsciously marginalized the agency of the donor. Indeed, donors seem to be gradually disappearing from our professional literature as we disregard their place in the archival process. Donor relations typically were accorded more consideration in older manuals of practice than they are in more recent editions.⁵⁸ But in the rush to define our profession in proactive terms, few archival thinkers have considered whether a more passive approach might offer the most effective use of scarce archival resources. Perhaps such an approach is better characterized as opportunistic rather than passive, or responsive rather than reactive. Directing effort toward motivated donors whose fonds fulfill our institutional mandates, rather than chasing after the reluctant objects of our archival affection, might be the most efficient means of leveraging scarce resources to complete acquisitions. There is obviously a balance to be struck between these two poles, proactive and opportunistic, but professionally we are reluctant to concede that donor agency has an impact on our latitude in implementing and realizing proactive acquisitions policies.

Shaping the Archive: Archival Consciousness and Donor Agency in Practice

If archival consciousness on the part of the donor is an essential requirement of having a fonds preserved in an archives, it also makes the donor think about what specific material should be preserved. The core archival functions of acquisition and appraisal are mirrored in the donor actions or functions of donating and shaping their fonds. Some carefully nurture the fonds, pruning

56 Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, “The Documentation Strategy Process,” 15.

57 Craig, *Archival Appraisal: Theory and Practice*, 48–49.

58 Compare, for example, the more extensive treatment of donors in Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 36–50, and the circumscribed treatment of donors in the revised version by Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 75–120.

it of unwanted items to craft a legacy to cast the creator in the proper light for posterity, and then search out the best archival home for it. Most individuals, however, choose to do nothing with their fonds, leaving their documentary material to the whims of fate after their death, letting it fall into the hands of what might be a respectful, indifferent, or negligent recipient.

Such unconscious, or perhaps subconscious, impacts on the survival and shaping of documentary material are most characteristic of the stewardship sphere of agency. In reorienting our inquiry toward the personal in the archive, Catherine Hobbs asks, “How much of the breadth of the archives is controlled by and allowed to grow through acts of will or through neglect or even through subconscious rhythms/imperatives in their turn?”⁵⁹ Reporting on personal habits in the digital environment, Catherine Marshall reflects on the impact of the unconscious choices made by creators on both digital and physical records: “Most people prefer to treat their personal artifacts casually; they are aware that some of the things they save will be valuable to them or their families in the future, but they don’t have the time or the patience to invest the upstream effort, nor do they have the prescience to know which things they will eventually care about.”⁶⁰ Marshall and other archivists who have written on digital personal archives often lament that “benign neglect,” which enabled so many physical personal documents to survive while untended, is inadequate to the demands of the digital environment, with its ever-present technological change and format obsolescence. But benign neglect in the past was never quite as benign as imagined today. House fires, so frequent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, claimed vast amounts of personal documentation. Marshall has perceptively observed that computer disk crashes are the “fires” of the digital age, remarking on the “fire-like quality of the periodic loss of digital belongings.”⁶¹ Increased mobility since the twentieth century has also taken its toll on the documentary record. Packing and moving results in untold amounts

59 Hobbs, “Reenvisioning the Personal,” 223–27. Hobbs also refers to the role of the subconscious in the creator sphere: “As people live, they create documentary residue, although they are not always consciously creating records” (p. 227).

60 Catherine C. Marshall, “Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving, Part 1: Four Challenges from the Field,” *D-Lib Magazine* 14, no. 3–4 (March/April 2008), accessed 30 December 2014, <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march08/marshall/03marshall-pt1.html>.

61 *Ibid.* See also Catherine C. Marshall, “Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving, Part 2: Implications for Services, Applications, and Institutions,” *D-Lib Magazine* 14, no. 3–4 (March/April 2008), accessed 30 December 2014, <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march08/marshall/03marshall-pt2.html>; Adrian Cunningham, “The Archival Management of Personal Records in Electronic Form: Some Suggestions,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 22 (May 1994): 94–105; and “Waiting for the Ghost Train: Strategies for Managing Electronic Personal Records Before It Is Too Late,” *Archival Issues: Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference* 24, no. 1 (1999): 55–64. Cunningham argues that precustodial intervention is important to ensure the long-term preservation of personal digital records.

of archival material ending up in the waste bin.⁶² What has survived from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in archival repositories might seem impressive as a whole, but it must be a tiny fraction of what individuals and organizations actually created, disposed of, or otherwise never offered to an archives. As Maryanne Dever observes, “When dealing with collections of letters, we are inevitably confronted by what we might call the ‘fissured archive.’ What survives of anyone’s letters will be but a fraction of the total, and their survival will be dependent, more often than not, on accident rather than design.”⁶³

Conscious action also plays its part in agency in both the steward and donor roles; it can act contrary to the interests of archival preservation, either through a reluctance to donate or the destruction of documents. An aversion to clutter and a lack of interest in the past result in the conscious destruction of personal documents. The periodic culling or weeding of material by a steward or donor is perhaps the most common means of shaping the fonds. In examining this otherwise unremarkable, everyday event, Barbara Craig considers its implications for our professional discourse: “Appraisal, in essence, is not something practised by a few initiates – it is something each of us does, largely intuitively, guided by needs that only the individual fully understands.” This understanding may be implicit rather than explicit, for the criteria of personal appraisal are “understood from the inside and rarely articulated.” Indeed, they may not be fully understood by the individual himself, but may be impulsive actions in response to temporary circumstances. The powerful pull of indecision is also present; we postpone a final decision on the fate our personal documents because we are “unsure about their possible uses in the future” and are aware that destruction is final. Craig concludes that we selectively shape our remembered past, both keeping and purging our documentary traces to meet our emotional and subconscious needs.⁶⁴

More recently, Jordan Bass has drawn on PIM studies to illuminate the implications of the habits of personal recordkeeping and appraisal in the digital environment. Though the studies have primarily analyzed individual information management practices in corporate settings, Bass shows that

62 A recently retired colleague at Library and Archives Canada recalled a veteran archivist’s dictum that, in terms of the loss of personal manuscripts, “three moves are as good as a fire.” Will we someday say, “Three hard-drive migrations are as good (bad) as a hard-drive crash”?

63 Maryanne Dever, “Reading Other People’s Mail,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 24 (May 1996): 119.

64 Craig, *Archival Appraisal*, 7–12. The personal appraisal decisions of creators and donors that Craig reflects on are also explored in Dever, Newman, and Vickery, *The Intimate Archive*. See also the review of *The Intimate Archive* by Jennifer Douglas in *Archivaria* 71 (Spring 2011): 147–150. Douglas rightfully chides the authors for concentrating exclusively on these decisions by creators and donors to the detriment of understanding how the actions of archivists might have shaped these personal archives.

they still offer insight into appraisal practices in personal lives. He identifies a folksonomy of personal values that interact and influence individual keep/discard decisions, including identity value, personal memory value, personal and familial historical value, emotional and sentimental value, and posterity and legacy value. This PIM research thus builds upon Craig's reflections on personal appraisal to demonstrate the wide range of conscious actions and subconscious motivations at play in shaping the personal archive.⁶⁵

The desire for personal or family privacy, or for anonymity, is perhaps the most forceful manifestation of donor agency that affects interaction with an archives. Shame, embarrassment, the fear of hurting feelings, and the desire to keep family skeletons in the closet deter certain donors from ever entrusting their material to an archives. With respect to Australian writers of a previous generation, Maryanne Dever discovered that the lure of posterity held few claims on them; for many, their sense of propriety "honoured suppression over candour, and decency over drama."⁶⁶ Archivists are sometimes surprised at the power of this emotion, which cannot be assuaged despite several assurances that access will be restricted. What seems banal to us may be intensely private to the would-be donor. According to Sara Hodson, "Donors often exhibit extraordinary concern about matters of privacy, perhaps in an eagerness to perpetuate or sanitize the good reputation of the creator of the papers."⁶⁷

While much of our body of practice derives from the paper world, the concern over privacy looms larger in the digital age. Initial indications are that the digital environment magnifies concerns over privacy; donors feel they have less control over, and knowledge of the content of, their own records and have more concern about the ease of transmission and misuse of personal information in electronic form.⁶⁸ Susan Thomas and Janette Martin confess that the UK Paradigm Project "has not acquired material that documents the personal aspects of politicians' lives. This type of material is of great interest to some historians, but it is difficult to persuade politicians to place this current personal material in a library, especially in a testbed project." This fear is likely not confined to politicians, and it shows how easily a vital part of the personal record, that which truly is the most "personal," can be excluded from our collective memory. Their political subjects were "circumspect about providing copies of confidential records which could compromise others, such

65 Bass, "A PIM Perspective," 54–67, 73–74.

66 Dever, "Reading Other People's Mail," 119.

67 Sara S. Hodson, "In Secret Kept, in Silence Sealed: Privacy in the Papers of Authors and Celebrities," *American Archivist* 67 (Fall/Winter 2004): 197.

68 Laura Carroll, Erika Farr, Peter Hornsby, and Ben Ranker, "A Comprehensive Approach to Born-Digital Archives," *Archivaria* 72 (Fall 2011): 68–69. For example, in this case study of the archives of author Salman Rushdie, the team at Emory University, Atlanta, remarks that, even in early conversations, Rushdie expressed concerns about having any part of his digital material accessible via the Web.

as email, constituent casework records or engagement diaries. Other anxieties include information falling into the wrong hands, either in transit or at the repository.⁶⁹ This experience was mirrored in a project to offer deposit storage to Canadian politicians, primarily cabinet ministers leaving politics after the 2011 federal election. Determined approaches to selected politicians succeeded in obtaining deposits of records from 48 percent of those approached, but only 13 percent of them agreed to deposit digital records with the archives. It must be assumed that all of them created at least some, if not most, of their records in digital form, providing further evidence of the reluctance of donors to entrust digital documents to a third party. While concern about privacy is certainly growing in the digital environment, it has also had a profound impact on donor mediation of the archival record in the paper world.⁷⁰

Writers and their families have proven to be among the most active – or perhaps best documented – shapers of the archival record.⁷¹ Their efforts to sculpt the fonds to present the desired face to posterity might arise from a heightened archival consciousness or an inherent belief in the power of the text, or perhaps it simply reflects a phenomenon that is at work in all lives but is showcased more prominently by the public and scholarly research interest in literary lives. Marjorie Barnard, whose fonds is discussed in *The Intimate Archive*, an exploration of the archives of three Australian writers, reveals “herself to be a keen editor of the archival record, producing a prim picture of professional engagement that nudges us gently away from any investigation of the woman behind the successful writer.”⁷² Also featured in the book are sisters Aileen and Helen Palmer, who sorted and organized the papers of their parents, writers Vance and Nettie Palmer. The daughters quite literally performed the role of “keepers of the flame” by consigning bundles of letters to the fireplace. But Aileen’s letters to her sister reveal her to be “a conscientious caretaker, anxious to preserve the papers but also mindful of the feelings of the people connected to them.” The authors of *The Intimate Archive* also believe that women’s archival legacies are “particularly vulnerable to destruction.”⁷³ Perhaps the higher standard of morality traditionally demanded of women in Western culture has inspired a more active shaping of collections by

69 Susan Thomas and Janette Martin, “Using the Papers of Contemporary British Politicians as a Testbed for the Preservation of Digital Personal Archives,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 27, no. 1 (April 2006): 40. See also Paradigm Project, *Workbook on Digital Private Papers*, “Working with Record Creators: The Nature of Personal Digital Archives,” accessed 30 December 2014, <http://www.paradigm.ac.uk/workbook/record-creators/nature.html>.

70 Tremblay-Goodyer, “Eureka! Federal Election 2011.”

71 Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and Rise of Biography* (London: Hutchinson, 1992). This book discusses the destruction of literary fonds and the battle for privacy by authors and their families.

72 Dever, Newman, and Vickery, *The Intimate Archive*, 6.

73 *Ibid.*, 12–16.

donors in an effort to remove such traces of the secret and personal, that which might expose women authors to critical moral judgment.

The re-purposing of a fonds or its use as the raw material for special projects, in anticipation of a subsequent donation to an archives, is another reflection of donor agency that can have a significant impact on the surviving record. Marshall McLuhan's literary agent, Matie Molinaro, has described how she and his widow, Corinne McLuhan, spent nearly three years "sorting, cataloguing, and filing" his personal papers as a necessary measure to make a selection of his correspondence for a published volume of his letters. Undertaking this labour of love also allowed them to prepare the fonds for its eventual sale or donation, because Corinne McLuhan had begun receiving inquiries about its disposition within months of her husband's death. Her entrée to archival consciousness through these contacts encouraged her to reflect on how she wished her husband to be remembered and to shape his legacy consciously through the publication of his selected letters and arrangement of his personal material for archival preservation and public research.⁷⁴

The impact of donor agency could, in one lifetime, swing from active destruction of documentary evidence to proactive preservation. Sue McKemish has shown how the Australian author Patrick White, later in life, had a sudden change of heart regarding his personal privacy: "there eventually came a time when 'privacy was no longer the issue' and carrying forward evidence of his life beyond his own lifetime was what 'mattered most.' So he agreed to [David] Marr's request for cooperation in the writing of his biography, started encouraging his correspondents to make his letters accessible to Marr." But for most of his life, White had destroyed the documentary traces of his life, burning his manuscripts, notebooks, and letters, and urging his friends to do the same with letters from him. As he remarked in a surviving letter, "It is dreadful to think ... that one's letters still exist. I am always burning and burning, and must go out tomorrow to the incinerator with a wartime diary I discovered at the back of the wardrobe the other day."⁷⁵ Not content to just shape the record, archival consciousness for White bordered on an obsession to eradicate the record, before a sudden, late-life archival "conversion."

Canadian author Alice Munro exercised control both before and after the delivery of her fonds to the University of Calgary Archives. She rigorously pruned her fonds of the personal in advance of the donation. JoAnn McCaig has remarked that Munro was "very careful to include only documents pertaining to the business of writing"; there are no personal letters or journals in the fonds. Munro also instructed the archivists to contact her if

74 Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, and William Toye, eds., *Letters of Marshall McLuhan* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987): vii–ix.

75 David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Sydney: Vintage, 1992), 323, quoted in Sue McKemish, "Evidence of Me," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 1 (May 1996): 34–35.

they discovered any “excessively revealing personal document,” to verify that she had intended it to be in the archives.⁷⁶ Such examples reveal not only the heightened archival consciousness of literary donors, but also the ability to exert agency in the appraisal of documents after surrendering custody of the fonds. The abundant evidence of agency among writers should not lead us to conclude that it is absent from other donors. It likely arises simply from the keen research interest in literary archives that places them under the scrutiny of the scholarly microscope. More generally, Frank Burke observes that “donors of manuscript collections can, and often do, insert statements in the deed of gift of their papers restricting access or use, and some even insist that only they provide the authority for researchers to use them.” Often archivists must accept such clauses against their better judgment because “without that commitment it is certain that many sensitive collections would go elsewhere, or worse, be destroyed.”⁷⁷

In archival manuals, the contest between our principles and the reality of donor agency passes almost without comment. With refreshing candour, Frank Boles admits that “the practice of taking inferior material from a donor to establish credibility and, hopefully, get the ‘good stuff’ later is well known.”⁷⁸ Well known, but seldom acknowledged. Archivists in the preceding examples most likely understood that, through building a relationship of trust with the donors and demonstrating their careful stewardship of the fonds over many years, they would later be entrusted with the more personal and revealing documents. Strict application of acquisition policies and appraisal principles to reject borderline material might well jeopardize the subsequent acquisition of important fonds.

The cumulative impact of donor interests and agency is that most private documentary material will be destroyed or otherwise disposed of without ever being offered to an archival institution. It is impossible to ascertain what percentage of the total personal or private documentation created is ever offered to an archives, but it is certainly minimal. Long before archivists have the opportunity to practise appraisal, stewards and donors have shaped the surviving record through myriad conscious and unconscious actions. Recent archival thought has marginalized the agency of the donor, and yet

76 McCaig, *Reading In*, ix–xiii, 13–15; and Douglas and MacNeil, “Arranging the Self,” 36–37. Douglas and MacNeil also comment on the shaping of the Lucy Maud Montgomery collection by her biographer, heirs, and other donors, as well as the efforts of author Marian Engel to cull her fonds to guard her personal privacy.

77 Burke, *Research and the Manuscript Tradition*, 180–83. Though I have concentrated here on the impact of donor agency on appraisal and acquisition, Carolyn Harris has written about the ability of a donor to influence arrangement and original order; see Carolyn Harris, “Paper Memories, Presented Selves: Original Order and the Arrangement of the Donald G. Simpson Fonds at York University,” *Archivaria* 74 (Fall 2012): 195–214.

78 Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 95.

the landscape of selection and appraisal is negotiated, perhaps even contested, ground, where donors define and assert their interests, and archivists persuade and negotiate. Compromise is often essential for preserving the best possible record.

Partners in Archival Memory

Archivists should better integrate donors into archival thinking, but what does this mean for archival theory and practice? Donor agency is a pervasive reality in private archives, which should be obvious in a practical sense. And yet it is hardly reflected in our professional writing about acquisition and appraisal, or in overarching concepts of archives. There is a gap between our theory – the world of evidence and authenticity, rational policies, documentation strategies, rigorous appraisal methodology, and ruminations about the record – and our practice.

Donor agency has very real implications for archival acquisition and appraisal. Our interaction with donors shapes the surviving record. Archivists are not alone in this endeavour, nor do we have sole control in determining what is preserved; donors are our partners in forging societal memory. There is negotiation, compromise. We can say no to any acquisition, but the donor, too, can say no in return; both parties must agree in order for documentary heritage to be donated to an archives. If we are developing theories that claim to be universal or overarching, applicable to both private and government archives, such theories should recognize and account for donor agency and accept that acquisition and appraisal are not the archivist's exclusive purview. In a more practical sense, collecting policies and documentation strategies must account for the uncertain and unpredictable element of donor interaction. Donors' interests will have tremendous impact on an archives' ability to acquire and preserve the documentary material that fulfills its mandate. This can have significant implications for the measurement of success in an institutional setting. In modern business management and program evaluation, it may be difficult to justify strategies or policies whose success can only be evaluated over years or decades of implementation, measured in "archival time." Archival policies should also recognize that we will have to respond to and evaluate unsolicited offers that might enrich and develop our collections.

Archives must consider how to reach donor communities in a global or strategic sense. Resources will never be sufficient for an archives to reach every individual who might be a prospective donor. Archival institutions should be cultural beacons that attract motivated donors. As archivists, we should promote our brand to prospective donors by playing an active role in the cultural life of our communities. Archival descriptions should explain how donors have shaped the fonds. Donor relations, and the reality of donor agency, should be a focus of our policies and practices at a macro, as well as a face-to-

face level. We should build archival consciousness among our communities to raise awareness and increase the pool of willing donors – to ensure we are offered the best material to fulfill our mandates.

Donors transform the archival environment. They exercise agency in the shaping of the archival record and as the initial arbiters of its disposition. Our literature in recent years has largely neglected the essential role played by donors, through an apparent narrowing of our professional focus, and through efforts to codify and rationalize our practices, and to impose theoretical order on Frank Boles' "ambiguous documentary universe."⁷⁹ But the reality is that appraisal and acquisition are not purely rational, scientific processes, but rather negotiated, perhaps even contested, ground. Judgment and flexibility, not the pure application of theory or principle, are ultimately essential to fulfilling our archival mission. Much is beyond our control, and it does not diminish our professional vocation to recognize that is so.

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79 Ibid., 65.