

those of the papers of the seventeenth-century diplomat Richard Fanshawe, about which I have written elsewhere.⁷ Most archivists will know many other examples. The story of the peregrinations of Newton's papers is well worth reading, but is not as unusual as the book's title suggests.

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The Allure of the Archives. ARLETTE FARGE. Translated by Thomas Scott-Railton. Foreword by Natalie Zemon Davis. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013. xvi, 131 pp. ISBN 978-0-300-17673-5.

The Allure of the Archives, by the historian Arlette Farge, is an English translation of her *Le goût de l'archive*, first published in French in 1989. Farge, director of research in modern history at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris, is the author or co-author of close to thirty books on aspects of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. A postmodernist, Farge's interest is in power relationships and in the lives of women, the poor, and the criminal in eighteenth-century France. Farge makes her postmodern stance clear in this book, arguing against the "tedious gloss" (p. 73) of positivist historical analysis, instead urging the researcher to dig deep into the facts in order to extract and interpret the untold stories of history, in her case the stories of the French underclass, whose lives are documented in police records and judicial archives found in the French National Archives and in the Library of the Arsenal, housed in the National Library in France.

The ostensible purpose of this book is to orient the historical researcher, neophyte or other, to the nature of archival research, with examples drawn from the author's particular experience with eighteenth-century French judicial archives. But the book also immerses the reader in the sense – the actual physical sensation – of working in an archival institution, of feeling and smelling and hearing the crackle of historical documents, in an effort to expose the researcher to the enormity of the documentary legacy resting in archival repositories.

Describing the research task as unsettling and colossal, Farge suggests that "these numerous and ample archival *fonds*, stored in library basements, bring to mind the hulking masses of rock in the Atlantic, called *basses*, that are visible only twice a year, during the lowest tides" (pp. 4–5). As Farge notes, her goal is to reach beyond facts and acts to draw out the "excess of meaning"

7 Geoffrey Yeo, "Custodial History, Provenance, and the Description of Personal Records," *Libraries and the Cultural Record* 44, no.1 (2009): 50–64.

behind the evidence: “emotion,” she argues, “is another tool with which to split the rock of the past, of silence” (pp. 31–32). The image of rocky seas and ocean swells recurs throughout the book; indeed, as translator Thomas Scott-Railton notes (p. 131), the French term *fonds* can refer “either to archival collections or to the ocean floor.” (One must ask, as with all translations, how much of this use of the oceanic metaphor comes from the author and how much is heightened by the efforts of the translator.)

In three elegant central chapters, the author takes the reader through the key components of historical research. “Paths and Presences” sets the stage by showing how people’s lives are illuminated by the words found in archival documents. In this chapter, Farge writes of French judicial archives as exposing a world of passion and disorder, of discord and confrontation. She draws the reader into the research world she inhabits, revealing the nature of the people, particularly the women, who rise up from the pages of the archives.

In “Gathering and Handling the Documents,” Farge reminds the reader that archives are “forever incomplete,” and that the work of archival research is slow, painstaking, and stubborn. She writes of turning page after page of police reports and, as a result of her thoroughness, coming across what she calls a “lively letter, nestled between two very serious police matters” – a “mutiny in the archive” (p. 67). These unexpected pleasures among the tedium bring joy, she says, but she cautions against the traps set by such intimacy. The researcher can become overly absorbed in the archives, Farge warns, forgetting how to interrogate the evidence objectively.

In “Captured Speech,” Farge considers the choices the historian makes when extracting information from the archives. When does one copy words and stories and carry them forward as contenders for the final historical narrative? When should one let the silences remain? The records Farge studies are accounts of crimes and criminals told from the policeman’s perspective. She reminds her reader to take into account the foibles and weaknesses of the police whose documentary evidence is under the microscope, warning against the “stutters and silences” that can result in a “gap-riddled puzzle of obscure events” (p. 94). Archival evidence can be twisted into anything, she says, and then just as easily twisted to its opposite. The historian must abandon abstractions in order, as much as possible, to bring to light the story of the events themselves.

In her short conclusion, entitled “Writing,” Farge urges the historian not to let the characters discovered through the painstaking research process “suffer a second death” through a poorly written story. She entreats the historian to consider the archival quest “a roaming voyage through the words of others, and a search for a language that can rescue their relevance” (pp. 121-23).

These short but insightful chapters are interleaved with three even shorter but highly evocative *mises en scène*, set in italic type and each with its own title, which conjure up the researcher’s experience within the archival

institution itself. “On the Front Door” brings the researcher from the bustling reality of the outside world into the inner sanctum of the archival institution. “She Has Just Arrived” paints a picture of the physical space and interpersonal encounters the researcher finds within the archival reading room. “The Inventory Room Is Sepulchral” evokes the image – the stereotype? – of the archives as austere mausoleum and the archivist as forbidding gatekeeper.

It is in these short sections that the archivist reading this otherwise compelling work will feel the most discomfort. The language in these sections is stark, filled with words like *chill*, *intimidation*, *shiver*, *battle*, *silence*, *strictness*, *defeat*. The rules of the operation of an archives, Farge says, are “absurd” (p. 52), and there is terror associated with obtaining a reader’s card and triumph at actually gaining entrée into the reading room. In that room, the researcher finds that the hands of the clock are motionless and the indexes sibylline. The archivist – impassive, severe, and imposing – clicks her heels ominously along the cold floor. The archives Farge portrays in these short dramas is a place of secrets waiting to be found, if the researcher can make it past the dragon at the gate. Are we really that stern and cold? Do we truly throw up such daunting barriers? Are archival institutions so desperately unwelcoming? The depictions, while beautifully written, make the archivist-as-reader want to shout “No, no, we are not Scylla or Charybdis! We are not lurking among the rocks and swells of the archival sea, waiting to sink the dreams of historical researchers!”

Despite this harsh portrayal of our profession – and, let us be honest, archivists are terribly sensitive when it comes to outsiders depicting who we are and what we do – the book is an engaging and entrancing read. It is a welcome addition to the English-language literature on archives, though one does speculate about why this book has been translated into English now, nearly a quarter century after it first appeared in French.

Publishing decisions are primarily driven by economics, not philosophy, but it is tempting to imagine that this translation – which comes in the early years of this overwhelmingly technological (and technologically overwhelming) twenty-first century – is something of a rage against the digital world that is changing every blessed step in the traditional, analog research process that Farge describes so eloquently. How will a researcher turn the pages of dusty, brittle, leather-bound police logs when all such records are digital? Will such records even be kept, given modern society’s concerns for privacy and confidentiality? How will we experience the “taste” for the archive – *le goût de l’archive*, to follow the literal translation of the book’s title – when what we taste, or smell, or feel is a keyboard or touchpad, not paper or parchment?

In her introduction to the book, historian Natalie Zemon Davis touches on this changing reality, noting that

the current digitization of archives ... has mixed fruits. On the one hand, there is the wonder of access, the ease with which we can bring distant documents before our eyes. Community is also possible, too, here an electronic one that replaces the exchange over lunch in the archive cafeteria or at a local seminar. On the other hand, there is the loss of the object itself, of the marginal notations missed by the camera, the signatures cut off, the paper not available to the touch, the bindings unseen (pp. xv–vi).

What Davis does not explore is the difference in experience when the researcher is using not digitized archives but born-digital archives, when nothing is “cut off” – when the very nature of the document is that it is no longer a *document* but an element in a database.

The question for archivists today is, what is lost and what is gained? Consider the records of police informants – *mouches*, or “flies” on the wall, as Farge calls them. These records, which Farge draws on so deeply in her research, document in great detail the remarks overheard by eighteenth-century eavesdroppers on the hunt for revolutionaries and rabble-rousers. The reports, she says, are as disorderly as the stream of conversation they captured, documenting everything from the attention-getting to the banal (pp. 105–6). These records are a scarcity in the world of police bureaucracy two centuries ago, offering rare insights into the daily lives and interactions of otherwise marginalized citizens.

What might be a comparable documentary record in the future? Far from being bereft of the evidence of “eavesdropping,” it is more likely that twenty-first- or twenty-second-century researchers will face even more chaos, as they dig through archived copies of Twitter feeds and Facebook posts, or when they review the masses of citizen videos posted on YouTube. We document each other, and ourselves, in infinitely more depth today than was ever imaginable two hundred years ago. The issue is not that such intimate records will not be created in the future. The problem is that they may not survive long enough to make it into archival custody, and they may not ever end up in archival institutions. And if they do find an archival home, their sheer volume and technological complexity threaten to overwhelm us, archivists and researchers alike.

Regardless of the lack of discussion of digital research and records, inevitable for a book written before such technology took hold in society, *The Allure of the Archives* serves an important purpose for its intended audience, the historical researcher, not by explaining *how* to do archival research but by reminding the reader *why* such research is important. To Farge, history illuminates facts and acts so that their depiction is not only accurate but also infused with the emotions that came with being alive more than two centuries ago – emotions all humanity experiences through the ages.

For archivists, this is not a book to study for its guidance on matters of documentary research. This a book to savour for the elegant writing and engrossing approach to the research process. Despite the too-rigid typesetting

of our profession, this is a book an archivist can turn to for inspiration at the end of the day, after enduring yet another argument with corporate masters about the importance of archives. This is a book that reminds archivists of the value to history, and to the future, of our efforts to “acquire, preserve, and make available” the archives in our care.

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Personal Archiving: Preserving Our Digital Heritage. DONALD T. HAWKINS, ed. Medford, NJ: Information Today, Inc., 2013. xx, 299 pp. ISBN 978-1-57387-480-9.

This collection of thirteen essays explores personal digital archives through discussions of emerging personal archiving software and services, developing guidelines and best practices, as well as the many technological but also practical challenges posed by on- and offline digital content in personal environments. The book is edited by Donald T. Hawkins, an accomplished information science and technology professional who currently blogs and writes for Information Today, Inc.¹ Although the book is not formally divided into sections, each chapter is loosely structured around one of three themes: the unique characteristics of personal digital archiving; practical advice for non-professional archivists; and emerging personal archiving software, online services, and relevant research initiatives.

The many unique perspectives on personal archiving in this book are drawn from an eclectic group of contributors whose disciplinary backgrounds include corporate IT research, human-computer interaction studies, computer engineering, media studies, and digital libraries and archives. While the intended reader is “anyone who has a mass of digital information and wants to organize and preserve it” (p. xvii), the book is clearly designed to appeal to both academic researchers and practitioners in the information sciences, as well as individuals who seek to archive their personal or familial histories.

In her chapter titled “Personal Archiving for Individuals and Families,” Danielle Conklin describes how four different individuals have approached archiving their digitized photographic and textual materials, stating, “Individuals and families, unfortunately, are not presented with a handbook at the start of their personal archiving projects” (p. 14). Conklin goes further to suggest that the “average person is likely unprepared to create self-imposed

1 See <http://www.infotoday.com>.