

Archives and Societal Provenance: Australian Essays. MICHAEL PIGGOTT. Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012. xxiv, 334 pp. ISBN 978-1-84334-712-5 (print), ISBN 987-1-78063-378-7 (e-book).

This volume, part of the Chandos Information Professional Series, is “a blend of new writing, previous publications and addresses, and reorganized combinations of earlier work” (p. 1). Author Michael Piggott, who for thirty-seven years worked as an archivist at the National Library of Australia, the Australian War Memorial, the National Archives of Australia, and the University of Melbourne, aims “to explore some of the connections between Australian society and its records” (p. 4), to plumb how records and their preservation, to borrow a phrase from Tom Nesmith, “reflect and shape societal processes”¹ (p. 3). In his introduction, the author also observes “that a record’s immediate context of creation and use resides within still wider layers of organisational, psychological, family, cultural, and historical provenance” (p. 3). He divides his book into four parts – on history, institutions, formation, and debates.

In his opening essay, “Themes in Australian Recordkeeping, 1788–2010,” Piggott sketches a picture of the influence British administrative practices had on the Australian colonies, an influence that was not so different from the way it played out in Canada and other colonies of the British Empire. He delves into the handling of documents that record the communications between colonial officials and the British government, and the eventual need, which Australians actively pursued, to seek copies from holdings in the mother country when local preservation was found wanting. As it was in Canada, the impetus for copying records resident in the mother country was the need of these records for the writing of history. Piggott also offers a series of vignettes of certain recordkeeping episodes he sees as indicative of the social setting of Australian records and archives. He sees some parallels between the resistance to bureaucratic control in the Australian goldfields in the 1850s and the attempt to institute a national identity card in the 1980s. He explores how mass migration and the First World War, which one Australian historian says “generated a seismic cultural shift” (p. 25), gave impetus to a flood of letter writing by the barely literate, and why, how, and with what success Australian repositories sought to preserve those letters. These sketches are certainly evocative of the social setting of and interplay between recordkeeping, records preservation, and historical writing, but in the end Piggott can only lament that Australian archival history is seen as “dull and, worse still, irrelevant,” and hope for “a new research agenda, new themes and new practitioners” (p. 29).

1 Tom Nesmith, “The Concept of Societal Provenance and Records of Nineteenth-Century Aboriginal–European Relations in Western Canada: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice,” *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 359, quoted in Michael Piggott, *Archives and Societal Provenance: Australian Essays* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012), 3.

In the second essay in part 1, “Schellenberg in Australia: Meaning and Precedent,” Piggott assesses the impact of T.R. Schellenberg’s visit to Australia in 1954. Although Schellenberg brought much-needed attention to archives while he was there and ably preached “the Old and New Testaments of archives and record management” (p. 39) far and wide in his tireless lecturing, Piggott suggests that his visit was later bestowed with more influence than it actually had, except in one not insignificant case. In 1954, there was no national archival institution in Australia, only a division of the National Library devoted to archives. Schellenberg “appeared before the Commonwealth Archives Committee where he managed to convince its members that archives and libraries were sufficiently different and the Archives Division sufficiently large” (p. 39) that it should be removed from its subordinate position in the National Library. This ultimately was done. Piggott adds some detail about this episode in his essay “Libraries and Archives: From Subordination to Partnership,” in the second part (Institutions), recounting how autonomous archives authorities grew from their beginnings as divisions of the national and state libraries. In his conclusion of this essay, Piggott makes several observations about how decisions of this sort, and perhaps decisions about amalgamating institutions once separate, are made. He says that “cogent arguments alone will not guarantee success – there is always a larger agenda in play” (p. 99), and that it is often too late to influence events because changes have already been determined behind closed doors. (Think of several amalgamations in Canada in recent years.) He further states that “means are not the same as ends, that archives will always need allies and that even the biggest archivist in the land will be subordinate to someone else” (p. 99). All these essays are well crafted to give a good sense of the distinctive pattern of institutional development in Australia and how different it has been from our own, where public libraries (as opposed to university libraries) have by comparison played such a small role in preserving archives.

The other two essays in part 2 deal with prime ministerial libraries and the archival work conducted by the Australian War Memorial. The title of the former is “Making Sense of Prime Ministerial Libraries.” As Piggott insightfully observes in his conclusion, the so-called prime ministerial libraries are “a democratic muddle” (p. 116). What has happened is that several universities have established what they call prime ministerial libraries, but they are more like research centres. In some cases, they hold digital copies of material preserved elsewhere. The National Archives and the National Library, which hold prime ministers’ papers, have co-operated with these efforts by providing links to their holdings. Such efforts, as muddled as they might be, do reflect how access to archives is being revolutionized by the digital age. We are likely to see more and more efforts to assemble collections of material to support particular research interests, and this will be part of the socially inspired landscape of the future. The story of the War Memorial is certainly one of the

ways in which Piggott's search for "what is characteristically different about our Australian experience" (p. 36) has hit the mark, given its considerable success in preserving records of Australian war involvements.

In the first essay in part 3 (Formation), "Saving the Statistics, Destroying the Census," Piggott tells the story of how throughout the twentieth century Australia destroyed its name-identified population census data by favouring privacy over research. We in Canada have not gone so far yet, but certainly the fate of census records in both countries brings societal perceptions not just to the door but well into the house of archives. This is definitely a case where the values that influence record creation and archiving are in plain and stark view. The remaining two essays in this section assess efforts to preserve business records, on the one hand, and the Australian contribution to thinking about archival appraisal, on the other. Piggott was directly involved in trying to preserve business records for part of his career. He finds that the results are less than satisfactory and that the traditional culture of business and records preservation simply do not mesh. This has been true most everywhere. But he sees what he calls some changes in the conditioning factors influencing preservation of business records, such as changes in the tenor of corporate governance in favour of greater accountability and acceptance of the notion that business has a wider responsibility to society than formerly assumed. Here again we see how important values are to the archival enterprise. The essay "Appraisal 'Firsts' in Twentieth Century Australia," which assesses Australian contribution to appraisal, summarizes discussion in the profession about appraisal and the particular take Australians had on the process in relation to international standards setting. It is easy enough to see that archival appraisal decisions play an important part in determining societal archives, but the rehash of professional discourse on the matter is a long way from illuminating how appraisal has contributed to the societal provenance of Australia's archival heritage.

The essays in part 4 (Debates) offer penetrating and often wry observations on matters that have engaged Australian archivists. In "Two Cheers for the Records Continuum," Piggott, a confessed skeptic on the matter, observes that Australian archivists are practical-minded people who "prefer straightforward case-studies of clever improvisation to nuanced discourses on interiority, spacetime distanciation, or anything preceded by the terms paradigmatic, situated or meta" (p. 181). He sees mainstream acceptance of the notion of records continuum as little more than fealty to the idea of a consistent regime of management of records from inception through to archival preservation and use. As such, he supposes, to tell archivists that the "institutions they manage are 'one of the information storage places for communal legitimation of actions and of societal domination by those in charge of totalities' would be decidedly counterproductive" (p. 182). Commenting on the various graphic representations of the continuum, he remarks that "any image which heavily

relies on the viewer to draw a correct inference has to take its chances, and recalls a hapless Polonius (in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) unable to decide if a cloud looked like a camel, a weasel or a whale" (p. 183). The author's humorous jabs aside, he is a discerning critic of both the strengths and weaknesses of the writing about the records continuum. His wit and incisiveness are also demonstrated in essays on collecting archivists and their critics, on the fanatical memory making of the renowned Australian-born performer and composer Percy Grainger, and on Indigenous recordkeeping in Australia. In the latter of these essays, "Acknowledging Indigenous Recordkeeping," Piggott makes a passionate plea: "What is needed now is an acknowledgement of a fifty thousand year history of Indigenous recordkeeping, and the will to imagine a new, culturally inclusive, truly Australian archival science (p. 265).

I began reading this book with more than a little familiarity with and interest in the Australian scene, and with an intermittent acquaintance of Piggott for about twenty-five years. By reading these essays, I learned a lot more about the Australian scene, and was prompted to consider how we go about fashioning an understanding of this hardly fleshed-out concept of societal provenance. I think that it is essentially a historical concept that aims to answer questions about how the records of a society came to be what they are, how they were preserved or not, and how they were used to social purpose. To answer questions like these involves external criticism of the archives of a society. Advocates of societal provenance believe that external viewing of the sorts of things evoked in these essays stands to enrich not only our understanding of archives but also archival science. There are glimpses of how that might be the case in this volume, such as in Piggott's advocacy for inclusion of indigenous recordkeeping in the scope of archival endeavour, but for the most part the writings skim the surface rather than probe the depths of the provenance of Australian archives, in Nesmith's terms. Nevertheless, I suspect that readers will both benefit from and surely enjoy reading these very accessible, highly suggestive, and often witty essays, which frequently give pause to reflect on the development of archives in our own country and on how this broad societal view might reshape our disciplinary perspective.

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1 Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists and the Changing Archival Landscape," *Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (September 2009): 503.