

A History of Archival Practice. Paul Delsalle.

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Originally published in 1998 as *Une histoire de l'archivistique*, this compact volume provides a readable and well-organized synthesis of the ways in which archives were managed across much of the globe from the dawn of writing to the close of the 20th century. Margaret Procter received Paul Delsalle's support as she translated the text into English for the first time, adding recently published research and modifications to the bibliographies (conveniently placed at the end of each chapter) to accommodate English-language sources where possible. The revised text ought to be essential reading for anyone seeking the nearest approximation of a "global archival history" currently available in English (p. 231). Advanced undergraduates and graduate students in history and library science programs in particular will benefit from the easily digestible, numbered sections.

It may be prudent at the outset to acknowledge the author whose ideas and arguments are primarily reflected in the text, even one that has undergone both revision and translation. Paul Delsalle, an expert in the early modern era during which the Hapsburgs ruled Franche-Comté (1493–1678), is a professor of modern history at the Université de Franche-Comté, Besançon, France. Also a holder of a degree in archival science, Delsalle lectured on that subject for a number of years, and has published on the history of archives in France and Quebec. His deep knowledge of francophone archival history still comes through in this revision – even though Procter incorporated "more examples of historical English practice" (p. xvi).

Delsalle's book, however, is not partial to any single country's archival experiences. The geographic coverage of the book is remarkably expansive and contributes to a corrective of the usual narrative of the origins of archives as a practice and a profession. Rather than solely arguing that "archival practice has its origins in Mesopotamia, developed in Greece and the Roman empire, spread throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and expanded globally (particularly in the English-speaking world) in the twentieth," Delsalle makes a concerted effort to include Ibero-Lusophone archives, as well as those in other areas of Africa, Asia, and the Americas (p. 231). His research lacunae are acknowledged to be the result of his inability to read Russian, Chinese, and Japanese, along with the fact that research on early archival practices in Scandinavian, Russian, and Arabic institutions is underdeveloped within the profession (p. 232).

While Delsalle acknowledges in his introduction to the 1998 French edition his goal "to avoid a wholly European concept of archives," some readers may find his account insufficiently global (p. 231). Indeed, many of the important transformations in the practices performed by archives and archivists that Delsalle emphasizes are largely European in origin. To cite just one example, Delsalle's claim – represented well in Procter's translation, one hopes – is that "radically new archival practices put in place by" Philip II in Spain "were to have a significant global impact on archival practice over the subsequent centuries," given that "Spain and Portugal already controlled ... not just Europe, but much of coastal Africa, the trading posts of Asia and, especially, the New World of the Americas" (pp. 114, 106). In fact, one could read the extent of Ibero-Lusophone rule as rather limited and conclude that its archival practices influenced *only* parts of Europe, coastal Africa, a few posts in Asia, and some areas of the Americas.

Other major trends that Delsalle highlights could be cast as similarly Eurocentric: (1) the rise of respect des fonds (which Delsalle situates in 14th-century Barcelona and Sardinia); (2) the symbolic association of administrative archives with royal power or religious authority; (3) the spread of "manuals and methods" throughout continental Europe in the 16th century (p. 135); (4) the opening of national archives to the public during the Napoleonic era; (5) the rise of archival education in the 19th century in Italy, France, Bavaria, and Spain; or (6) the expansion of historians and genealogists as users of archives in the 19th and 20th centuries. Delsalle defines archival practice through the administrative and nation-building processes that gave rise to so many archives

in his account, thereby giving limited space to private, personal, family (except for royal families), and community archives. He also makes little differentiation between records and archives, a definitional choice that itself marks the text as European (pp. x–xi).

The geographical organization of the chapters in *A History of Archival Practice* demonstrates something of the difficulty of writing a synchronously global history of any subject. The so-called “ancient” and “classical” worlds are summarized in chapters 1 and 2, which begin with the prehistory of writing found in cave art and petroglyphs. Turning to Mesopotamia, Crete, Persia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Anatolia, and Celtic lands, Delsalle works mightily – and perhaps unsuccessfully – to distinguish between archives and libraries, as evidenced in both the archaeological and literary record. He claims that the act of keeping records is nearly instinctual with humans, something that could be challenged given that homo sapiens existed for more than 200,000 years before the evidence of writing appeared (p. 5). In fact, in his description in chapter 3 of “archives and archival practices in Asia and Africa,” he ponders whether “oral archives,” that is, the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next orally, should be regarded as archives that merely do not have “physical support throughout their ‘lifecycle’” (pp. 44–46). Along similar lines, chapter 4 describes developments in the Americas up to the 18th century, noting that knotted *quipus* functioned as “the state archives of the Incas” (p. 59). If oral transmission (of stories, poems, legal precedents) and non-written forms like *quipu* have “documentary” histories, then the focus on written administrative documents-as-archives seems a bit strange. Accordingly, perhaps, the oral transmission of ideas within Europe should also be a part of archival history.

Moving on to narrate European history from the 5th to the 18th centuries, the following six chapters make up 50 percent of the text (pp. 65–164), or arguably the heart of the book. The apportionment of content on medieval and early modern Europe may by itself be a novelty for some practising archivists, especially those in North America, whose knowledge of archival history often begins in the 20th century. Those steeped in European archival history would be able to identify the areas where Delsalle – or Procter, in an effort to cite more recent publications – breaks new ground. For example, the inclusion of Michael T. Clanchy’s 2013 revision of *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* helps make the argument that while the long medieval era may have been one of textual compilations, forgeries, and destruction of documents, it was

not without changes, notably the increase of literacy, the spread of paper from various eastern sources, and the “invention of indexing” by the 13th century. At that time, written archives were becoming regarded as part of the treasure of kings and popes, and these archives bolstered state formation.

Besides narrating political transformations well, Delsalle does not neglect to discuss how the profession emerged through a flowering of competing practices. Early modern archivists, some of whom created complex classification systems, are introduced vividly in chapters 9 and 10. In southern France, Pierre de Balma gave each bag of documents in the city archives a name from the Bible or mythology, such as “Bachus,” for a bag of wine tax receipts (p. 152). The ability to command an established historiography seems to strengthen Delsalle’s case during those moments when he intervenes in scholarly arguments. His claim that the “significance of the archives law passed by the French revolutionary government on 25 June 1794 has been often exaggerated” would need be situated by reading the debate, which remains largely in French, including articles by Bautier, Duchein, and Hildesheimer, which are cited in the bibliography at the end of the chapter (pp. 144, 149–150).¹ Indeed, as none of the subjects is treated exhaustively, the main value appears to be the succinctness of the synthesis.

The pace and content of the book changes in the final five chapters, which cover the 19th and 20th centuries more quickly and topically. These chapters focus on legislation, buildings and readers, physical dangers to archives, displaced archives, professionalization, and international networks, adumbrating these themes from mainly European and North American perspectives, with brief nods to developments in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. (Many countries that arose out of European empires during the 20th century patterned their new national archives on European models.) The growth of the cultural function of archives, even within institutions whose holdings traditionally served administrative purposes, deserves to be pulled out as a separate chapter (p. 190).

1 In 1992, Michel Duchein argued that the 25 June 1794 law was “revolutionary”; see Michel Duchein, “The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe,” *American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992): 14–25. See also Robert-Henri Bautier, “La phase cruciale de l’histoire des archives : la constitution des dépôts d’archives et la naissance de l’archivistique, XVIe siècle-début du XIXe siècle,” *Archivum* 18 (1968): 139–49; Michel Duchein, “La Révolution française et les archives : la mémoire et l’oubli dans l’imaginaire republicain,” in Pierre Bougard, *Liber Amicorum, études historiques offertes à Pierre Bougard, Mémoires de la Commission Départementale d’Histoire et de l’Archéologie du Pas-de-Calais* 25 (Arras, FR: Commission Départementale d’Histoire et de l’Archéologie du Pas-de-Calais, 1987): 261–65; Françoise Hildesheimer, “Des triages au respect des fonds. Les archives en France sous la Monarchie de Juillet,” *Revue Historique* 286, fasc. 2 (Octobre-Décembre 1991): 295–312.

Still, a few historiographical interventions about more recent history do bubble to the surface. Delsalle argues that Natalis de Wailly was only a 19th-century promoter of, not the inventor of, “the principle of provenance” as the basis for arranging groups of records, an argument now well accepted among historians (p. 170). He also speculates that “the feminisation of the profession” during the 20th century may not have been as disastrous to its prestige as once thought (pp. 210–11). A more thoroughly researched labour history of archival work across the ages might put the issue of gender into perspective. Taking the long view of history, we know that “public slaves” had done the “routine work” of the Roman Tabularium (p. 22), and even in 2017 the state archives of South Dakota in the United States relied on convicts for some microfilming of its state documents.² That there was change amid continuity is certainly a theme presented throughout the book.

Featuring digestible prose and speedy overviews of time and space, *A History of Archival Practice* in its revised English version should be widely read. With its historiographical updates, it may even supersede the original French version of two decades ago.

2 South Dakota State Historical Society, “Microfilm Unit of the SD State Archives,” accessed 18 December 2017, <http://history.sd.gov/archives/microfilmunit.aspx>.