

Radical Collections: Re-Examining the Roots of Collections, Practices and Information Professions. Jordan Landes and Richard Espley, eds. London: Senate House Library, 2018. xii, 82 pp. ISBN 978-1-913002-01-5

JENNIFER GRANT

Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections

York University Libraries, Toronto, Ontario

This volume of papers, published in 2018¹ by the University of London's School of Advanced Study at Senate House Library, is the product of a 2017 conference held at Senate House Library, entitled *Radical Collections: Radicalism and Libraries and Archives*. Its editors, Jordan Landes and Richard Espley, are academics and librarians employed at Senate House Library as a research librarian and Head of Modern Collections, respectively. Contributors to this volume, who were presenters at this one-day conference, are a mix of librarians, archivists, and academics based predominantly in the United Kingdom and also in Ireland and the United States of America. Given the varied backgrounds of the contributors and their topics of discussion – content of relevance to the library, archives, and museum professions in particular – one might expect the intended readership for this volume to be equally varied. Six papers and an editor's introduction form the entirety of this book, and I discuss them in the order in which they appear.

In the introductory paper, editor Jordan Landes provides background for the

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papers to follow, describing the focus of the Radical Collections conference call as a consideration of four questions (p. 1): *Who works in archives and libraries and who uses them? What is in collections? How are they being organized? What now in libraries, archives, and the information profession as a whole?* The conference organizers' focus was intentionally broad, with an emphasis on collecting and collections rather than types of institutions. The overarching theme of radical collections relates in part to the Senate House Library's mandate to acquire books, archival materials, and ephemera originating from radical socio-political movements of the 20th century. Landes also gives an extensive summary of the conference, its participants, and their presentation subjects, acknowledging the limitations of a one-day conference to be comprehensive in scope and highlighting the lack of diversity in its roster of all-white presenters.

Indeed, one can recognize the origins of this publication, as the experience of reading these papers resembles that of attending a conference featuring presenters with different subject areas and levels of scholarship, united by a loosely defined theme. The broadness of the conference theme is a liability when condensed into a short, six-paper publication and is complicated by different interpretations of *radical*, the meaning of which is dependent on context and the positionality of the writer and the reader. Other volumes of papers on the same theme have grappled with the use of this term in a more fulsome, deliberate, and interrogative manner,² and while some authors in this collection take that approach, others either define radical materials simply as those that challenge the status quo or make no extended reference to concepts of radicalism at all.

The first paper, by academic Mairéad Mooney, "Radical or Reactionary? James Wilkinson, Cork Public Library and Identity in the Irish Free State" (pp. 9–21), provides a history of the Cork Public Library under the stewardship of its Protestant librarian during times of social and political change in early 20th-century Ireland. Using historical research, the author describes the challenges of creating library collections for Irish children in post-independence Ireland, where a desire to acquire pro-Ireland library materials was complicated by the absence of an Irish publishing industry. However interesting this history –

2 A 2015 special issue of *Archive Journal*, entitled "Radical Archives" and edited by Lisa Darms and Kate Eichhorn, spends its entire introductory paper elaborating how the varying uses of the term *radical archives* mirror the lack of consensus between various communities of interest in related discussions, including theorists of "the archive," artists, archivists themselves, and other interested parties. Available at <http://www.archivejournal.net/essays/radical-archives/>.

including the fact of Wilkinson's status as a Protestant librarian in the Irish Free State – Mooney's question about Wilkinson's intentions (radical or reactionary) as a manager of the library's collections is both impossible to answer and beside the point: the author presents his decision-making as likely pragmatic and uncontroversial. Wilkinson simply appears to have been a dedicated and well-respected librarian who had no choice but to stock his library with British books because there was little else available.

The second paper in this volume, and its most successful, examines the connections between so-called radical collections, the acquisition choices made by librarians, and the lack of diversity in the LIS profession. Librarian Alycia Sellie's paper, "Beyond the Left: Documenting American Racism in Print Periodicals at the Wisconsin Historical Society, and Theorising (Radical) Collections Today" (pp. 23–34), provides an overview of the Wisconsin Historical Society's policy to acquire all periodicals published in the state, including those produced by racists and white supremacists, and highlights her belief that collecting racist material can be considered anti-racist activism. She correctly suggests that the onus for dismantling white supremacy in libraries and archives is on the white workers who dominate the profession. Of importance in this paper is Sellie's argument that the profession has not done enough to diversify collections simply by acquiring materials produced by people of colour and that it has the same responsibility to acquire materials that clearly document and bear witness to the history of white hate, however discomfiting that material might be to a predominantly white profession (p. 33).

To the question of what is in the collections, the editors include two papers that discuss interactions with radical collections. Medical historian Lucas Richert describes his experience of visiting archives and special collections in the UK and Canada in his paper, "'Mind Meddling': Exploring Drugs and Radical Psychiatry in Archives" (pp. 35–39). Richert declares that the intent of his paper is to "explore the ways in which researchers, archivists and funders interact to create historical analyses, medical knowledge and policy" (p. 36). However, the paper's main value for archivists may be found in Richert's account of his experience as an archival researcher, as he encounters a variety of access restrictions and archivist interventions during visits to archives in Canada and the UK, and these have both negative and positive effects on his research. It is a useful reminder of both the real effects of institutional decision-making about access on the individuals using our archives and of the power we have in the archival

profession – particularly those of us working with researchers – to guide the research process based on our knowledge of our records. One wonders if more observations about the intersection of radical content and the work of archivists would have emerged here had the author’s research project been complete at the time of writing.

Julio Cazzasa’s paper, “Cataloguing the Radical Material: An Experience Requiring a Flexible Approach” (pp. 41–49), is a straightforward description of Senate House Library’s multilingual collections related to radical or reformist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries in the UK, Ireland, and Latin America. Here, the author simply defines *radical* as materials that challenge the status quo of their period (p. 41). The author details the scope and content of each collection and the extent of original cataloguing done by staff and volunteers, a process complicated in some cases by the language of some items and challenges involving earlier descriptions. However, Cazzasa offers no further significant commentary about these items beyond the observation that these collections are well-used and valuable additions to Senate House Library (p. 49).

The paper by Hannah Henthorn and Kirsty Fife, “Decentering Qualification: A Radical Examination of Archival Employment Possibilities” (pp. 51–63), answers the questions, who works in archives? and what now? The authors review current literature on diversity, discuss diversity and inclusivity schemes in the UK and the United States, recount their own experiences as recipients of diversity scholarships and bursaries, and offer suggestions on how institutions and organizations can do this work better. Though the authors rely heavily on their individual experiences in this discussion,³ they also broaden their focus to make important points about the insufficiency of funding in institutional diversity schemes to fully finance living expenses and tuition fees, and they suggest both that more support be provided to part-time and distance-learning applicants and that continuing support be made available for new professionals after their traineeships end. The most radical proposal they make is to “de-centre academic knowledge as the only valid route to qualification and reposition it as *one* of the routes to becoming an archivist” (p. 62). While they identify the emphasis on a multi-year, graduate-level educational path as a significant barrier

3 Here the authors also briefly cite their experiences with physical disability as one of the barriers to obtaining their archival qualifications. The effect of physical disability on securing employment in the archival profession is an under-studied subject in archival theory and literature and is deserving of a more fulsome discussion, which I hope the authors further investigate.

to many would-be archivists, this issue is not given adequate discussion space in this paper.

Rounding out the volume is a paper by academic Katherine Quinn, “Enabling or Envisioning Politics of Possibility? Examining the Radical Potential of Academic Libraries” (pp. 65–77). Addressing the question of what now, Quinn interrogates the educational potential of academic libraries that have been changed by the influence of neoliberalism and the “marketisation of scholarly communication” (p. 67) by examining the context for higher education in the UK and evaluating the efforts of two initiatives, the UK Radical Librarians Collective and the Hive, a joint-use academic and public library in Worcester, UK. The strength of this paper lies in the author’s assessment of these initiatives, which includes practical examples of how to reconsider the “radical possibility” in academic library spaces and the role of librarians in generating change. As with some of the other papers in this volume, the author’s research on this subject is unfinished; while she poses some provocative questions about libraries’ claims to “radical, anti-capitalist or liberatory features” (p. 65), her commentary would be more convincing had she been able to cite results from her ethnographic research on library users and workers, not yet completed at the time of writing.

One can see in this volume the positive influence of writing by theorists like Michelle Caswell, Jarrett Drake, Tonia Sutherland, and diversity writer Sara Ahmed, all of whom are cited by contributors (and editor Landes), in highlighting the ways that archives and libraries continue to fall short in their acquisition practices and the ways these significant blind spots are affected by the problems of white privilege and homogeneity in the information professions. Unfortunately, the Radical Collections conference itself appears to have been a more successful endeavour than this resulting volume, which lacks breadth due to both its small number of contributors and its inclusion of papers that either lack clear theoretical frameworks or present unsupported hypotheses based on uncompleted research. Consequently, this volume’s status as an open-access publication, which allows prospective librarian or archivist readers to easily engage with its contents in a selective manner, works in its favour.