

REVIEW:

THE ADMINISTRATION OF ARCHIVES

by J. H. Hodson

Pergamon Press, 1972. xv & 217 pp., 13 illus. 5.50

It was once the custom of some writers to praise the work of all potential reviewers of their book in order to avert an unfavourable review. Mr. Hodson seems to have reversed this by making veiled criticisms of all the possible reviewers of his book. It is, therefore, difficult for anyone to criticize it without appearing to be inspired by personal animosity. This preamble is necessary because the present reviewer is criticized by Mr. Hodson (on p. 58) for an unhealthy concern with the status of archivists in the English local government hierarchy. Mr. Hodson obviously feels that archivists should rest content with the humble station assigned to them by God and the National Joint Council.

As the publisher's puff says, Mr. Hodson has worked in a County Record Office, a Public Library and a University Library, which is a wider range of experience than most English archivists achieve in a lifetime. However, his experience has been restricted to three repositories which can only be described as atypical of English record offices in general. Furthermore, for nearly a decade, Mr. Hodson has not been a practising archivist, but a lecturer at the University of Manchester so that he knows little, except what he has read, of the new developments in English record offices during the past five years.

Mr. Hodson has compiled this book mainly from the standard volumes on archive practice available in English and from articles which appeared before 1968 in Archives and the Journal of the Society of Archivists. No use has been made of equally valuable articles in the Society of Archivists' Repairers' News Sheet, The American Archivist, or Archivum; neither has La Gazette des Archives been consulted. It is presumably because no articles were available to Mr. Hodson that he neglects certain areas of archive administration. Search rooms and their equipment receive very perfunctory treatment (p. 85); the Liverpool, Bodleian, Aberystwyth and Bangor training courses are not mentioned (pp. 22 and 43); no reference is made to the use of computers by archivists (p. 59), or to the recent developments in the field of local government records management (p. 52).

Although Mr. Hodson's use of extensive quotations frequently obscures his own views, it is clear by the end of the book that his ideal archivist is very English and very traditional. His favourite occupation is to calendar medieval deeds with loving care, and he has no concern for either his low salary or low status. He should even avoid asking for a better building for the archives in case it displays too much concern with his own status (p. 84). Content to remain at the bottom of the administrative hierarchy forever (p. 58), he receives his reward in occasional visits to a ducal mansion where he relieves His Grace of a further box of medieval deeds. If the ideal archivist is fortunate enough to work in a library, then he is freed of all responsibility for administration and "second class, modern records" (p. 137). (Incidentally, 'modern' for Mr. Hodson means post-1889 when files begin to accumulate - p. 113) The archivist's concern with the records of his own employer should apparently be minimal, although he is permitted to provide a rudimentary records management service for his

noble depositors (p. 82). But the ideal archivist's principal aim and purpose is to provide material for academic historians (chap. 2).

It will be a great pity if non-archivists in Britain ever accept this book as a standard for record offices. There is still too much confusion in the minds of British academics about the purpose of record offices as a recent article in the Social Science Research Council's Newsletter (no. 14, p. 30) has shown. It would be a greater pity if Canadian archivists thought that their British colleagues subscribed to Mr. Hodson's beliefs. Many, like Mr. Sargeant of Worcestershire and Dr. Hull of Kent, have always believed that the archivist's first duty is to the records of his employer and this has not prevented them from providing a first-class service for academic historians too. Neither do British archivists seek to work in public libraries where status (and, therefore, facilities and salaries) are inevitably lower than elsewhere. Mr. Hodson himself quotes horrifying examples of libraries' failures in the past (pp. 61 and 65), but adds with touching faith that conditions are much better now. Recent visits by this reviewer to English public libraries gave the impression that they find it difficult to obtain qualified archivists while the accommodation is usually inferior to that of record offices. The minimum of service is provided, and the archives themselves suffer from bad conditions.

Mr. Hodson is also very ready to see dissension among British archivists where none exists. His suggestion that the Society of (Local) Archivists was formed by seceders from the British Records Association (p. 23) is the exact opposite of the true story, while his belief that there was tension between local record offices and the National Register of Archives (p. 26) is ludicrous to anyone who can remember the pioneering work of the first two registrars. In each case, a little research would have provided him with the correct version. He also manages to imply that Dr. Hull is opposed to the educational use of records (p. 172), although Dr. Hull was a pioneer in that field as well as records management. Mr. Hodson has also misjudged one of England's best living archivists (whom he patronisingly calls "Ellis") by describing him as "uncertain" on the subject of lamination (p. 145).

On the subject of lamination, he fails to note the great advantage which the Langwell process has over the Barrow machine - it is dry and can, therefore, be used safely with fugitive inks (p. 101). Similarly, he fails to distinguish between the merits of mechanically operated mobile shelving and the demerits of manually operated (p. 112). He condemns wooden shelving without realizing that it has certain advantages (p. 107) and is extensively used in some countries. His comparison of the costs of photocopying processes (p. 168) is apparently based on the provision of a duplicate microfilm rather than an original. The true cost for a single copy would be almost the same as for a Xerox copy. He revives the ancient legend that shelves should be open for the free circulation of air (p. 109), while admitting that documents in boxes on those shelves will not benefit from it (p. 116). There are many similar points of criticism, and this is certainly not a book to be placed in the hands of "students of librarianship and library science, librarians, record officers, intending... archivists".

--Edwin Welch
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