Remarks on Contemporary Archives[1]

By RENÉE DOEHAERD

Professor, University of Brussels
Archivist-paleographer at the
General Archives of the Kingdom
at Brussels

WE speak more readily of archives than of ourselves. However, I should like to depart from this tradition of reserve and make some remarks on the intellectual position of the archivist with respect to the problem of contemporary archives.

By the problem of contemporary archives, I do not intend here either their preservation or classification, but the necessary task which faces us all, and which becomes increasingly urgent, of destroying a large part of them. And by destruction, I do not mean the necessary destruction of documents which duplicate others, but pure destruction, which will relegate certain facts to oblivion by eliminating the written evidence of things that might have been remembered. I believe I am not exaggerating in saying that this task gives rise to certain doubts, a certain uneasiness. And I believe that this uneasiness might be dissipated if we were assured that, within given limits, our action could be supported by a criterion which would exhaust, or at least attempt to exhaust, all possibilities. That is the theme upon which I propose to comment briefly.

First of all I would consider the nature, the origin, of our indecision, of our uneasiness. I believe that it is partly, and secondarily, of an emotional origin. This task is, in fact, contrary to the archivist's a priori conception of his mission, which is to him the cherishing of historical evidence; he dedicates himself to a positive, an optimistic task . . . and then he is asked to perform a negative, a pessimistic one! But in addition to this sentimental uneasiness, which is soon overcome, there is another and more serious cause

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for anxiety. What we are required to do is not a trifling matter. This work of destruction places us in a position to choose the picture which our contemporary world will leave to the men of the future through the written document. This work places us in the position of having to satisfy the curiosity of future historians by the choice we have made. A futile choice, indeed, as compared with other choices made in the world, or the more urgent decisions of our own lives, but a choice which matters to us intellectually as historians.

I do not need to tell you that any choice is in itself difficult when we cannot escape the necessity for making it, when we must assume the consequences of it and when we alone are responsible: we feel responsible and we are, and that is the source of our uneasiness.

What are we to do to resolve our indecision and take definite action when confronted by archives from which eliminations must be made? We take a guide. But what guide? That is the problem in a nutshell, because it is on the measure of confidence which we have in this guide that our peace of mind will depend. There is one guide ready to take us by the hand, a natural and ostensibly an inevitable one, which tends to dominate all our action and thought in this field, and of which most people who select contemporary records avail themselves. It is *historical interest.* But regardless of how natural, how inevitable it may seem, we cannot deceive ourselves that it is not, in certain respects, a fragile guide.

Why? Because it is an unstable concept.

Let us examine it.

It is clear that the historical interest of a Pirenne or of M. Bloch is not the same as that of Michelet. *Historical interest is a changing, developing concept.* It seems, for example, that it has so far developed in the sense of expanding; today there are more considerations involved in a study of history than there were a hundred years ago. And if we want to characterize this expansion, we might say that, starting from the same basis of *accident* and *occurrence* as political history, it has ended up by bearing on what is permanent and enduring, on a par with social and economic history.

A living and changeable concept, *historical interest* is not, however, a personal concept. What is personal is the inclination which makes us choose this or that aspect for study or work. But all of us understand the interest inherent in all the forms which history assumes in our time. And this common point of view does not depend so much on the same instruction, on the same culture, as on one of the essential aspects of the historian's work. At bottom, he never

does anything but study past problems which have a more or less obvious connection with the present. It is because economic and social problems are of present interest that one studies those of the tenth or fifteenth century. It is because regional tendencies are of current interest that historians inquire into whether our country showed some consistency before 1830, something about which there was no question forty years ago. In this connection, we might say that history is never anything but a variation on the present, and the present is common to us all. An idea which changes with time, *historical interest* is, on the other hand, a subjective concept common to all men of the same period. These observations permit us to appreciate the implications of a choice based on this criterion: and it is perhaps of such a nature as to give us a fallacious confidence — it will not be a personal choice, but the same choice that any archivist or historian of our time would make, or approximately so. When Gachard had the commercial records of Antwerp merchants of the sixteenth century destroyed, his choice was made from the point of view of historical interest in 1840. Such a choice undoubtedly constitutes historical testimony, but it shows decisively the fragility of his point of departure. Under the aegis of historical interest, our choice will never be anything but the choice of a given period. It makes us act in the light of our own time and for our time alone. It thus becomes necessary to think ahead.

Are we then compelled to give to the men of tomorrow only the picture of our own times as seen through our own eyes? Do we have to follow the same procedure as the annalists of the Middle Ages who have preserved only the memory of what they were interested in? The fact is, that we, like them, run the risk of not satisfying the curiosity of the historians of the future. But then, what kind of curiosity will it be? We do not know. We only know that it will change with future society; that if this society tends to develop strongly along agricultural lines, it is on the subject of agriculture that the historical interest of its contemporaries will be crystallized, and our times will be studied from this angle. If, on the contrary, it develops more strongly along industrial lines, facts on industry and industrialists in our time will be brought to light; if sports should unexpectedly play an important role, it is the life of the boxer of 1945 that will be sought. This future historical interest thus constitutes for us a *theoretical unknown*. Will this *unknown* paralyze our action? Can it do so? For there are other criteria for making a choice, criteria which enable us to make it without reference to the point of view of the time in which we

live, and which, without necessarily being in opposition to our historical interest, largely surpass it. And these criteria are given to us by the essential nature, by the purpose of history itself.

It seems that we can agree in saying that the purpose of history is to study society of the past, and the life of the men in this society.

Therefore, regardless of the objective sought, an objective determined by the time in which he lives, the future historian will study only our society and our life in this society.

What conclusion as to the subject with which we are concerned can we draw from this assertion?

That it will be advisable to preserve, in the first place, all documents which will permit the future historian to reconstruct our society, its institutional framework and the collective events which change or inspire it — documents concerning the group or groups of which society is formed, which reflect the behavior of groups of individuals, and which are general in scope. And this document of general scope will always have precedence over documents of *particular* scope. That is a first principle which should always be respected.

Does that mean to say that the *particular* document should be systematically destroyed? No. For the historian also wishes to know how individual life was organized in a given society. If he does not dwell on the individual considered as a unit of thought, of feeling or of creation, he studies social individualism, i.e., the individual as representing a group of men adapted to the same conditions — I would say, as a typical specimen of the human race adapted to a society. It will be necessary in the future to be able to reconstruct what in our time was the behavior of a worker, a peasant, a financier, a merchant, an official, a Music-Hall artist, a professor, a banker, etc., to consider only broad categories. And here I am only drawing a lesson from Pirenne himself, who, in the last volume of his history of Belgium, takes the trouble to describe the life of the small manufacturers at the end of the nineteenth century, and goes so far as to tell us that they lived parsimoniously during the year in order to spend their vacations at Ostend or Spa.

And this concern about conserving typical specimens of individual and social life — I shall not mention the inner life of individuals, which artists and thinkers will immortalize as their responsibility — does not take us very far. Espinas had only to reconstruct the life of a merchant of Douai of the end of the eighteenth century in order to show us the probable conduct of the industrial bourgeoisie of our northern cities at that time. I would say that the

type itself would make possible the elimination of specific cases. It is therefore advisable to establish series and to conserve typical examples of them. This principle of destruction, which permits a great deal to be destroyed, imposes a restriction in a more strictly documentary and practical field; it prohibits us from ever destroying an archival series without having preserved a typical specimen of it.

But is it sufficient to permit the future historian to reconstruct our society and the way in which we lived in it? Everyone will see here the barrier which we might strike: that of preserving only the record of the *qualitative aspect* of historical phenomena.

We know medieval society and its organization, we know the qualitative development of human life and activity during this period, but we will never really know it because it has not left us a single figure!

A final rule thus becomes necessary; we must preserve a *quantitative picture* of our civilization; we must preserve the figures.

Moreover, the development of statistical science, the spirit of which has become instilled to an ever increasing extent in our activities, gives us singular help in this task.

Like the foregoing principle, this one entails a strictly documentary and practical restriction: we shall never destroy documents without taking the precaution of seeing whether figures should not be extracted from them, in brief, without making a quantitative record of the destruction. That is necessary; our work cannot be capricious.

Our choice will then depend upon three principal criteria: to preserve the document of general scope, preserve the types, preserve the quantities; and it is only in the last place that I would refer to *historical interest*, in the name of which we will perhaps preserve, but never destroy.

These are general principles. I intended to make them so general that they might constitute the framework into which each particular case might be fitted. In expounding them, I have only attempted to formulate the doctrine from which practices with which we are all familiar are derived, without, however, having been expressed. Perhaps they may serve as an ideological basis for the codification of these practices. This codification will be difficult, because the nature of the practices requires an eminently flexible form, but it must nevertheless be made. It is urgently necessary to formulate principles of destruction applicable to every type of archives which we are likely to encounter. Mr. Genicot has shown us

the way in a masterful manner. At any rate, I believe that if we keep these principles in mind whenever we are faced with archives from which eliminations must be made, we shall at least be undertaking a task which follows a certain orderly plan and which will be directed at exhausting all possibilities.