

# Critical Judgment of Posner's *American State Archives*

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ERNST POSNER's study report *American State Archives*—"this monumental study" (Philip P. Mason, *History News*), "the most complete and comprehensive report of its kind that is anywhere in existence at present" (James W. Patton, *Journal of American History*)—has received much favorable notice from the reviewers.

Waldo Gifford Leland in the *American Historical Review* called the book "an exceedingly important and well-written book which, for the first time, presents a comprehensive, authoritative, and critical study of the archival and record agencies of all the states and of Puerto Rico." Lee Ash in the *Library Journal* wrote, "Here is one of the most interesting projects that has been supported by the Council on Library Resources, Inc." He added: "The report is the result of extensive travel, discussions with local archivists and political figures, and considerable review of the findings by other specialists. It has certainly been worth the effort." "This notable book . . .," Lester J. Cappon predicted in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, "will become at once a landmark in the field of American archives, indispensable to the archivist and valuable to the historian in many ways he might not suspect from the title." Dr. Cappon further noted, ". . . this report for the first time in our history provides the guidelines for achieving more effective archival operations and in turn more useful service to administrators and scholars."

A. M. Gibson in the *Journal of Southern History* said, "The book contains a challenge to each state for improved care of records . . . Posner's work will be instructive for the staffs of state record systems, for researchers, and for state legislatures as a guide to improvement. Many professional groups, especially historians, will find the book helpful." L. H. Butterfield in the *American Archivist* wrote, "Dr. Posner has done his work so well that his book will go on working for the rest of us—and for good government and historical scholarship—into the indefinite future."

About Dr. Posner's style there has only been praise: ". . . nontechnical, readable . . . Yet . . . professional and thorough . . ." ". . . fresh, frank, and constructive" (*Journal of Southern History*); "Dr. Posner's tone is temperate and sensible, and his style is mercifully free of technical jargon"

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(*American Archivist*). Dr. Cappon (*William and Mary Quarterly*) noted: "Unlike most project reports which in their printed versions still retain the procedural scaffolding, Dr. Posner's comprehensive study became a book by virtue of his concept of the subject and the unity he has achieved in its structure." He continued, "The simplicity of the book's organization facilitates its use, . . . and the author is always master of the voluminous data he assembled. From this rich stockpile he extracted only the most pertinent matter; his text, never burdened with needless detail, moves along without conscious effort."

And of Dr. Posner himself the reviewers have written generously: "He brought to it his vast knowledge of archival administration as background for the voluminous data he assembled . . ." (Cappon); "His intensive course in the preservation and administration of archives, given annually over a long period of years, has been taken with great profit by employees of nearly every archival establishment in the United States" (Patton); "Only a very sure-footed, incisive-minded, and stouthearted scholar could have produced this epochal book" (Butterfield); "He was . . . the ideal choice to make this survey of the American States Archives, and to draw conclusions and make recommendations with a perspective which no other man in this generation has" (Clifford K. Shipton, *North Carolina Historical Review*).

"The result is a pioneering and penetrating study that illuminates the growth of state archival programs, clarifies the present role of state archival agencies, and points the way to better agency standards and higher professional goals" (*Journal of American History*). "Even as a brief sketch of a large subject it fills a long-standing gap in the historical study of American archives" (*William and Mary Quarterly*). "The reports [on the States] are comprehensive, authoritative, and revealing, and each is concluded by a paragraph of comments, criticisms, and recommendations" (*American Historical Review*). A. L. Green (*Archives and Manuscripts*) noted as being "of special interest . . . the practical comments concluding the survey of each state, giving the author's unequivocal opinion of the shortcomings of the official programme, or of the professional staff situation." Dr. Leland observed, "The third chapter, a summary of findings, should be read by all who have any interest in state or local history. It reveals the many differences from state to state . . ."

As Bruce C. Harding (*Michigan History*) reported,

Besides providing a brief history and an analysis of each state's archival programs, one of the major purposes for conducting the study was to create standards for the organization and operation of archival agencies. In this task, Dr. Posner had the assistance of the Committee on Professional Standards of the Society of American Archivists, which is composed of the past presidents of the society.

On the value of these standards reviewers wrote favorably: "Dr. Posner has offered an impressive practical set of standards to which the Society of American Archivists has given official approval" (*William and Mary Quarterly*). "The last section of Dr. Posner's book deals with standards for state archival agencies; would that it could be required reading for every state official whose office creates records" (*North Carolina Historical Review*).

"This monumental study is bound to have a great impact upon the archival profession in the United States," Philip P. Mason stated in *History News*. Dr. Leland wrote, "I hope that this short notice will attract historians to the book. I have found it exceedingly interesting reading, and it is devoted to a noble cause." Lee Ash (*Library Journal*) pointed out to librarians:

The Posner book is a model for surveyors of archival and library administrative programs equally. It will serve those concerned with the development of collections, and anyone involved with public personnel problems. While the book is limited to the study of archives, its broad approach affords the author an opportunity to make many brilliant observations about librarianship.

We may note a few other comments on the usefulness of the book beyond the purposes for which intended: "While this study is not, nor is it meant to be, omniscient, it will cause considerable discussion among scholars and government officials, and it is hoped, will serve to foster considerable improvement in the archival programs of all the states" (*Michigan History*). "The Study of State Archival Programs . . . and the conclusions he reached are of prime importance alike to the archivist, the historian, and the genealogist" (*National Genealogical Society Quarterly*). From the foreign reviews thus far received we quote this observation from *Archives and Manuscripts*: "The pertinence of the subject-matter of this book to Australian conditions, and its importance to Australian governments and archive bodies is too obvious to need dwelling upon."

Finally, just as we go to press, there comes to our attention a most perceptive review article in *Records Management Journal* by William Rofes. From this article we quote two paragraphs:

The first major impression of the volume may not have been intended, but it still comes across with startling clarity. American archival practices and standards in too many states are abysmal. It is the rule rather than the exception that public archives and archivists are ill-respected, ill-treated and underbudgeted. Perhaps the shock will lead to a change. On the other hand, there is no real exposition as to the *why* of this situation. The explanation may be too ephemeral for factual analysis. With the taming of the continent and the disappearance of the geographic frontier, there appears to be more introspection in American thought. The concept of history and historical documentation has become clearer. There is a growing recognition of the desirability of accurate and professional public recordkeeping. Translating this perception into viable budgets, however, is a long process.

This book also marks quietly what many may consider a revolution in professional archival thinking. Posner includes *Records Management* as an integral part of the public recordkeeping process. He accepts what has been in many quarters beyond the pale. Granted that *Records Management* is given only a minor part of the space in the book, it is clearly indicated as a responsibility of public recordkeeping. Certainly this will raise some eyebrows. (The mutterings from the back benches can be heard already.)

*American State Archives* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964) is still available from the publisher at \$7.50 a copy. We are happy to report, however, that the sale of the book has been so good as to indicate the need for a second printing.