The Scholar and the Archivist—A Partnership

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THE HISTORICAL RESEARCHER, as practically every professional learns and far too many forget, is bound not only by time and space but also by the quantity, quality, and availability of his sources. There is nothing particularly startling in this statement; on the contrary, like many open secrets, it is so obvious that its significance frequently is either overlooked or underemphasized. In short, the more raw material the investigator can paw and ponder, the better his chances for a complete and competent end product. The higher the quality of his sources, the better will be his article, monograph, or book. And the more easily the researcher can locate a depository that holds what he thinks he needs and the more easily he can identify materials and find them again—other factors considered—the more finished his written product.

Genteel historians, despite some notion to the contrary, do not manufacture sources, although a few, I daresay, sometimes fabricate counterfeit conclusions on the basis of valid evidence. If the researcher cannot coin sources in his home workshop, he must go and search for them in libraries, museums, and archives. Some are large and national, others are small and regional, and still others may be classified as private or public. They devote themselves to treasuring the records of institutions, of countries, and of special subjects such as medicine, sailing ships, ethnic groups, or aviation or postal history. Most certainly the searcher for the past finds himself, at one time or another, visiting foreign collections. He passes the trim marine guards at Madrid's naval museum, penetrates the security of the records section of the Foreign Legion in Paris, and, with a love that passeth all understanding, waits long and patiently for material in the Lancashire Record Office or the National Library of Ireland. Anyone who has labored in foreign archives is bound to praise the courtesy and service given serious workers by the staffs of our own National Archives and the Library of Congress.

The plain truth, of course, is that a good many researchers, upon occasion, enter depositories to fish. These followers of Peter cast nets in likely waters. They are aware—as the results of letters of inquiry or because they took the customary precaution of consulting such titles

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as Hamer's guide to archives and manuscripts in this country or to Alman's guide to manuscripts in Great Britain and Ireland relating to America—that a particular archive holds a particular set of papers.[1] Such advance preparations are imperative. One knows as much as one can about a collection before one ever sets foot in an archive.

Unfortunately, not enough institutions compile, print, and distribute calendars of or guides to their collections, which could be studied before one actually arrived at a library. We desperately need more of these. But such publications run to a dear price, and not too many archives, although they know they need them, can afford them. Some smaller institutions lack not only proper finding guides but also are without properly constructed catalogs. A few arrange their holdings in such higgledy-piggledy fashion that they are comprehensible only to him who conceived the chaos. I have always wished that such persons might read and take closely to heart Shera and Egan's excellent book on bibliographic organization.[2] Without subject bibliography and without adequate cataloging, both curator and researcher are adrift. The scholar would welcome and be most appreciative of more guides to collections. Lucile Kane, of the Minnesota Historical Society, has compiled fine, professional guides, which may well serve as model examples.[3] Curators might benefit also from Gibson's well-organized guide to regional manuscripts in Oklahoma.[4]

The researcher, as indicated, begins his piscatorial adventure by knowing, at least in general, that a particular library has available material he thinks will be usable. If, for example, he is interested in the general story of the University of Minnesota or in some specific aspect of its development, he calls upon the competent and knowledgeable Maxine Clapp or Clodaugh Neiderheiser, curators of the University Archives. He tells them as plainly as possible what he wants, even though he may not be exactly sure of what he needs.

He says, "I intend to do a study of the School of Medicine or the development of the Liberal Arts curriculum." He may indicate an interest in a biography of, say, a Prof. Zebulon Wintertree. The researcher makes such statements because he believes that curators possess certain knowledge: first, that they themselves are tolerably well acquainted with the general history of the university; second, that they are familiar, in an intimate way, with their documentary holdings;

[1] Philip M. Hamer, *A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961); B. R. Crick and Miriam Alman, eds., *A Guide to Manuscripts Relating to America in Great Britain and Ireland* (London, Oxford University Press, 1961).

[2] Jesse H. Shera and Margaret E. Egan, eds., *Bibliographic Organization* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1951), esp. essays beginning on p. 127, 163, 200.

[3] See, for example, *Manuscript Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, Guide 2 (St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society, 1955).

[4] A. M. Gibson, *A Guide to Regional Manuscript Collections in the Division of Manuscripts, University of Oklahoma Library* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1960).

third, that these holdings are arranged and classified in systematic fashion and are easily available; and, fourth, that the curators are persons of good will, are friendly, and are sympathetic.

For some 40 years now I have been knocking on doors of innumerable archives, both in this country and abroad, petitioning assistance. I have learned that, in the last analysis, the finest research source is not the documents themselves but is the degree of interest and of cooperation manifested by archivists. A poorly trained, inept, careless, and uninterested curator is not an archivist but, at best, only a custodian. Such an individual is a symbol of disaster, a guide to calamity.

I ask no one to hold my pen for me, to select what data I need, to interpret my findings. These obligations are mine, and I am prepared to fulfill them. But it is not unreasonable to expect curators, on the basis of knowledge of their holdings, to suggest, for example, that I peer into manuscripts of which I have no awareness, to offer clues and hints, to recommend a look at collateral evidence whose existence I never had expected. If, for example, I am indeed committed to a biographical study of Professor Wintertree, I would expect and appreciate a university archivist to say, if it were true, "You know, Professor Wintertree was an intimate friend of President Summerbloom. In the Summerbloom papers we have a run of informal, personal notes written by Wintertree." This example, although abecedarian, makes plain what I mean.

If, perchance, it is unclear, let me relate a personal experience. I was researching in a relatively small but significant collection. The archivist—I should use the term in quotes—was a semi–self-trained individual who owed his job to nepotic influence. His family had donated the bulk of the collection. This gentleman carried his classification system in his head and could usually, without a moment's hesitation, pack-rat his way through a jumble of cartons and sway-backed filing cabinets to return triumphantly with what I desired. I cannot state that he did all this with great show of enthusiasm or with any carnival spirit, but he did it.

During the 4 days I endured his reluctant companionship I felt a consistent uneasiness. All oldtime researchers develop a sort of special sense, somewhat, I suppose, like that of a truffle hound. Should I be asking for something I suspected might be available, but the specific nature of which I did not know and so could not formulate in a direct, crisp question? I always have followed the practice, as do most experienced diggers, of asking an archivist for suggestions if no suggestions are volunteered. Indeed, it is imperative that the scholar make plain that he is open to suggestions and assistance.

The archivist in question held an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree (than which there is none cheaper) from an intellectually moss-choked college with an enrollment of 350. "Doctor," I said more than once

and laying heavy emphasis upon the title, "Doctor, can you suggest anything else which would contribute to my project?" Each time, he shook his head. He had given me everything I had requested. There was nothing more.

Two-and-a-half years later, after my article was in print, a note arrived from a friend who also had patronized the doctor's establishment. It was one of those good-natured, cheery, dirk-in-the-ribs communications. "Why," it twitted, "didn't you consult So-and-So's diary —there's a lot in it you might have used." Now, the subject of my research problem and the topic of my friend's project were poles apart. Nothing indicated a relationship between them, not even the slightest clue that So-and-So's diary might be of value to me. Yet those yellowed pages would have spoken loudly had I known of them. The doctor knew this, and yet he felt no obligation to share.

The reason I know he was aware of the diary's value to me is simple. I wrote him, enclosing as I always do as a gesture of courtesy a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Eventually, the reply came. It was about as I suspected and expected: I had not requested the diary, but, had I done so, he would have been delighted to bring it out. It is upon such occasions that the strong seek solace in spiritus frumenti and the weak turn to assassination.

Let me make myself clear. I do not expect an archivist, in a large or small or public or private institution, to have knowledge of the contents of each and every bit of paper in his custody. I do expect him, when he does know of a source with which I am unacquainted and which he feels will improve my research, to draw my attention to it. No man can request an item of which he is entirely unaware. Yet a cardinal rule in the fascinating game of seek-and-ye-shall-find is the extending of the helping hand. I always feel honorbound to draw my graduate students' attention to sources of which they are unaware and cannot be expected to know exist. What really happened in the case of the nefarious doctor is that, because he knew and did not share, he placed a restriction upon his collection, a restraint both insidious and unprofessional. In more pessimistic moments I am tempted to believe that the ignorant, uncooperative librarian or archivist is the greatest restrictive influence of all. Fortunately, my moments of despair are few.

It is gratifying for the healthy survival of history that most archivists —although at times I wonder how they manage—demonstrate enthusiasm and take genuine interest in a scholar's investigations. More than once my depression was lifted by a curator's encouragement. More than once his zeal mounted while mine declined. There was a day when I was attempting to check the details of an 1838 murder that took place in the gaudy Galt House in Louisville, Ky. Foreign travelers were fond of citing this particularly bloody and unsavory affair as evidence of a prevailing spirit of lawlessness throughout the Nation.

I had requested and received a contemporary account of the shooting and was eagerly turning pages. Just then the librarian came up. "You know," he said, holding out a volume published in 1882, "I remembered this and thought it might help." Entitled *The Law of Murder*, the book included the indictments, evidence, and speeches for the entire trial. I doubt if I ever would have turned it up without assistance. Such gracious instances could be multiplied a thousandfold. I can never cease being grateful.

Every researcher of experience, I believe, considers the able archivist as an associate. Most certainly, old hands do not see a curator or librarian as a clerk-lackey who exists only to fetch and carry. The investigator who views an archivist as a sort of automatic conveyor belt not only is depriving himself of growth and educational advantages but also is missing the profitable and mutual exchange of ideas between professionals who hold much in common. When researcher and archivist labor with common respect, each gains from the other. Each is dedicated to the same goal: the advancement of knowledge, the enrichment of the story of human experience.

I do not fret too much over what, in some institutions, appears to be a growing tendency to make research increasingly difficult, to hedge in the seeker with all manner of restrictions, although I do regret petty annoyances. I do not worry, although I am troubled, because usually the understanding, work-a-day archivist helps me evade picayunish, police-type regulations. Generally, most of the unrealistic rules are laid down by administrators who are neither historians nor archivists and who have not a ghost of an idea of what research scholarship is or what a researcher needs. Please understand me—I am all in favor of sensible protective practices and devices.

I feel that researchers should register when they first arrive at an archive. I think they should be compelled to take notes with pencil or typewriter and not with ink-filled gadgets that sputter and splatter. I do not believe it cricket to scissor out portions from holographic letters or from printed books. I consider the smuggling away of documents in an inside pocket to be a heathen custom. I do not look with approbation upon fertile, but anonymous, authors who scribble cosmic sentiments upon documents or books. I know that the proper place for smoking is not the research stool when one is bent over a manuscript. Pipe-droppings and cigarette sparks can "antique" an ancient tome, but cannot improve or age it. In short, I hold that everything possible should be done to protect and preserve source materials.

My ire, on the other hand, shoots to dangerously high temperature when I face other types of restrictions. Here is an institution that refuses either to lend or have a copy made of a microfilmed run of newspapers. It will not render this service even if a potential borrower is willing to pay for a microfilm copy. This practice is justified, says the superinten-

dent of the institution, because he wants scholars to come to his library to do their work. Such a practice, supported by such reasoning, seems specious if an institution is in the business of promoting knowledge. Another archive permits one to work freely and at will but will not allow the researcher to photostat or microfilm a single item. How truly wonderful it is when the reverse is true! Witness a sentence or so plucked from a graduate student's letter of a few days ago: "Research continues to go remarkably well. I spent a number of days at the [National] Archives and went through 13 vols. of letters for the years 1844, 1845, and 1846. I put in an order for them to microfilm 1,400 sheets from these volumes. Since this is the second batch of material, I anticipate a very productive period of note taking."

Another institution permits a visitor to examine only one box at a time of personal papers. The great disadvantage of this rule, of course, is that it cripples survey, making it impossible to compare or contrast themes that develop during examination. I feel, unless there is good reason for restriction, that it is not unreasonable to request access to three boxes at a time, so that the researcher may bird-dog through them. I do not advocate, as you well know, trotting out more than a worker can handle in a given period.

There is another irritant. One distinguished library prevents even a reputable researcher from borrowing and taking from the building any periodical published before 1850. Yet these journals are on open shelves and subject to theft or mutilation daily by hundreds of undergraduate students. Another institution flatly refuses to permit a member of its own faculty to borrow a volume from the serial set. Some librarians just do not seem to understand that scholars don't go to the sources just to look up a specific name, date, or item. Obviously, we hunt for the specific. But most of us go to documents to understand a theme, a movement, a sweep of events. We like, as in the case of the serial set, to pursue and peruse at leisure in our own studies where we can compare new material with notes and observations made during the years. Then and only then can we extract the most from such a source.

I resent the custom, practiced by some depositories, of having to explain in detail to a director just why I want to examine certain sources, what I intend to do with them, and how I am going to utilize them. In many instances I am working on a hunch, and in every instance it is almost impossible for me to state succinctly how and in what fashion I hope to use material when I have never seen it. I am more than willing to make a general reply—to say honestly and frankly that I am working on, say, the general development of the United States Marine Hospitals and that I have hopes that I may find something useful. To make plain that I am indeed fishing. I am equally annoyed when an administrator appoints as curator of a collection an inept, stupid individual with no

conception of the problems of the scholar or of the nature of scholarship. Historical treasures should be safeguarded and preserved, but, if they are to justify their existence, they must be tended by trained people and must be made available to qualified researchers. I hold the greatest respect for libraries—with closed collections, with rare book and special collections—that do not circulate their holdings. Only a fool, of course, will demand access to papers deposited with a stipulation that they be closed to research for a stated period.

Another, more insidious and less obvious, type of restrictive practice is a beautiful gimmick designed to hamstring the growth of knowledge. It is widely known and not infrequently used and can be formulated thus: The best way to prevent a researcher from reaching material is either not to catalog it or to catalog it so ineptly that it cannot be found, or, adding one more step, to have such a confused cataloging system that nothing can be found. Fortunately, such practices are generally restricted to small, private collections headed by amateur volunteers.

Today more and more custodians of smaller collections are becoming more and more aware of the fact that the archivist must be trained, must possess broad, general knowledge, and must be rather intimate with his holdings. Smaller institutions the Nation over are becoming thoroughly modern in their points of view. They know that national treasures should be sent to depositories equipped to care for them, where they will be properly cataloged, where they will mesh and make plain pattern with like material. These alert, enthusiastic custodians of portions of the Nation's past fully realize that no longer, as in the 19th century, is local pride in locally held documents a justification for keeping them. They realize that local pride demands the transfer of documents to institutions equipped to protect them. Papers, fragile memories of yesteryear, if they are to last through the ages and to contribute to generation after generation, demand not only tender, loving care but also scientific protection. This means proper vaults, proper temperatures, proper humidity. It means a card catalog based upon well-established principles. Jewels must be kept in jewel cases.

I sometimes think that the most significant aid an archivist can give the research historian is an understanding of what history is and of what the scholar is attempting. Such a comprehension is the best assistance possible. If there is a meeting of minds, finding aids, important as they are, assume secondary value. This is no place to discuss in detail either the nature or the philosophies of history, yet I would like to snatch a moment to say a few things briefly.

It frequently is said, as I wrote some years back, that the historian is the keeper of the record, as if the chronicle already awaited preservation in a musty vault beneath the high altar or in a cloistered library. Such a conceit pictures the historian as a mundane St. Peter, painstakingly and faithfully inscribing in a ledger the world's good deeds

and sins. And such a fancy ignores the fact that, so tragically and so frequently, the record is not yet complete, may never be so, and, most certainly, is not crystal clear.

Unfortunately, the record is neither a finished thing nor always available. The historian must collect the bits and pieces of man's culture, fitting them together as the medieval artisan assembled myriad-colored shining shapes to bring a stained-glass window to dazzling perfection. The historian is, indeed, an artist, for he arranges multihued facts, one by one, into a meaningful design. Each segment is an entity, yet every fragment becomes one with the other and with the perfect whole. There is patient searching for the right piece, and the fitting together of the particles is accomplished only with skill, sympathy, and sensitive caution. The result of the researching and the writing may not be *the* truth, but it is a scholar's view of truth.[5]

When I am asked why I am a historian, I frequently reply as did Richard Cobb, an outstanding social historian of the French Revolution. "Well," wrote Cobb, "all you can say is [you are a historian] because you like working in records and working through bundles and finding things. It's a sort of satisfaction of curiosity, almost insatiable curiosity. I don't think it has any other social purpose. I think a historical vocation is something that is in oneself in the same way as one might be fond of bridge or playing chess." Then Cobb added: "One is very pleased when one finds pupils who, also, rather than taking history as an examination subject, are bitten by this bug. And then you see them getting started in the *Archives Nationales,* or elsewhere and gradually sinking themselves deeper and deeper into the intricacies of their subjects and getting more and more satisfaction out of it."[6]

An archivist, to my way of thinking, is a trained person who assists a research to swim in a bottomless sea of endlessly fascinating records. The wise archivist knows, as does the sagacious scholar, that the researcher does not define his research topic but that the documents dictate the subjects to be researched. And the documents determine findings.

An archivist understands that, in the final analysis, the creative historian refrains as much as possible from conceiving of his discipline as utilitarian, from believing that history is obligated to develop good citizens, from insisting that history must help man solve problems. I hold that no logical case can be made for history as a body of useful knowledge in the practical sense. From many points of view, history is useless knowledge, but there is a usefulness to useless knowledge. History, like literature and the fine arts, should be an adventure of the mind. Let it remain an act of faith. History is a long, broad avenue that leads not to training, but to knowledge. History has value for man in exactly

[5] Philip D. Jordan, *The World of the Historian,* p. 2–3 (Lansing, Historical Society of Michigan, 1963).

[6] Richard Cobb, "Interviews With Historians," in *Colloquium,* no. 2:25–26 (Oct. 1964).

the identical manner that art and poetry hold eternal truths for man. And if, as in all wisdom, man's reach exceeds his grasp, is this not the true purpose of education?[7]

The historian must embody successfully the complex variations of the human spirit, must give values substance and substance values, must make thought a personal experience. There are pathos and pain and frustration and exultation in learning and in finite hearts that yearn. The researcher researches because he has an insatiable curiosity, not necessarily because he sees inherent in history a social purpose or a functional use.

What, then, are the varieties of assistance needed by the mature and experienced possessed with curiosity? In reality, they are quite simple. He asks that documents be properly cataloged; that they be properly and systematically arranged in folders, drawers, or boxes; that they be numbered or coded, so that they may be cited with some degree of exactitude; that they be easily available; that they be properly protected against vandalism and guarded against the ravages of temperature and humidity; that they be restored when restoration is needed and repaired when torn; that they be treated as the crown jewels they certainly are. The researcher desires the archivist to understand and be sympathetic with both his concept of the research problem and with the problem itself. He welcomes guidance and assistance. He hopes the archivist will remember always that, although the scholar must spend considerable time looking up and verifying specific, detailed data, his primary role is to read the documents freely and with as little restriction as possible and to try to understand what the sources are trying to tell him.

And once again, as I have on numerous occasions, I want to express great, personal gratitude to those many keepers of the seal, both in this country and abroad, who are knowledgeable and understanding and who have aided me with graciousness and generosity.

[7] Jordan, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge," in *The Historian*, 22:237–249 (May 1960).