Confessions of a Reformed Archivist

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I SPENT nearly 8 years in the National Archives, my first professional position after graduate school. Perhaps I stayed too long. Admittedly, there were moments when I hated the place. But on the whole, those years were wonderfully educational, in some respects far surpassing my formal training at the University of Pennsylvania. It was atypical, I know, but for 2 years contemporary history absorbed my time. But most of my stay at the National Archives was typical of the experiences of my fellow archivists, and I am proud to say that I have had experience in every conceivable archival activity as well as a few inconceivable ones.

What did I learn that was so valuable to me? Obviously I became familiar with bodies of records and through them with historic events and trends of great interest to me as a historian of science and technology. Less obvious but probably as significant was my induction into the archival way of looking at historical sources. I am not talking about formal doctrines and practices—those always aroused my instinctive skepticism about system builders. What I refer to is the sense of structure in bodies of records and the urge to relate meaningfully bodies of records to one another. This was, and is, in notable contrast to the older library-oriented way of fragmenting collections, intellectually if not physically, into discrete pieces and of disregarding interrelationships of series and collections.

When I came to the Science and Technology Division of the Library of Congress to launch a history of science program, for the first time I had to view its Manuscript Division from the inside. Collecting papers was one of the principal activities I envisaged for the Library of Congress. From many technical standpoints, the Manuscript Division was significantly inferior to the National Archives. The Division was then at a very early stage of its self-transformation, in many ways now successfully achieved. One of my first problems was to figure out a way to develop a new specialized interest in a body with distinct, notable traditions of its own. At the same time, my personal research was taking me into a widening circle of historical societies, university libraries, and archival institutions. Without in any way lessening my respect for archival friends or my adherence to many archival positions, I became more knowledgeable about and sympathetic to the great wide world outside the confines of the National Archives' *Handbook of Procedures* and the collected writings of T. R. Schellenberg.

The author, who is Editor of the Joseph Henry Papers, gave this paper on Oct. 20, 1967, before the Society of American Archivists at its 31st annual meeting at Santa Fe, N. Mex.

Still another dimension to my education has come with my present assignment as Editor of the Joseph Henry Papers at the Smithsonian Institution. Preparing a comprehensive edition of the writings of a great man, however, does rest in part upon knowledge of the ways of archivists, librarians, and other holders of the scruffy stuff history is made of. It is one thing to bring collections into the Library of Congress; finding Joseph Henry papers in the collections of the Manuscript Division is quite a different problem.

On reflection, I believe that at every stage of my development I have had to face up to the question of the relationship of specialists and special bodies of materials to what is thought of loosely as "general" or "conventional." Most institutions holding archives or personal papers are not specialized. The norm is usually a conglomeration of bodies of sources for a diversity of topics. This is so obvious in the case of my two former homes, the National Archives and the Library of Congress, that I need not linger over them. It is also self-evident to even the most superficial overview of the major university libraries and historical societies. But even those institutions with a high degree of specialization, like the Library of the American Philosophical Society, although inclining towards a particular intellectual pole are quite likely to have significant holdings for fields outside their chosen sphere. When you are dealing with natural bodies of records, either archives or personal papers, holdings will reflect the diversity and unpredictability of life, not the neatness of artificial subject categories.

I have encountered three different reactions to materials for the history of science and technology. The first is to stress the overwhelmingly specialized nature of the manuscripts as an excuse for keeping hands off. It always troubles me to find archivists and curators with training in political history or literature who adopt this stance but have no qualms, apparently, about handling a collection of the papers of a missionary to Brazil, for example. Apparently church history and Brazilian history are not specialized topics. A specialist in the Progressive Era in a depository will not hesitate long over the papers of a banker of the past century but will balk at the papers of an astronomer.

As I remember it, most of my time at the National Archives was spent with nonscientific records. The staff then and now is too small to afford the luxury of pure concentration in special areas. There is the assumption that a good general education and sound archival experience prepare every staff member for anything in the Federal records. After all, if I could review schedules for the Home Loan Bank Board, a diplomatic historian could have authority, to give a hypothetical example, for the fate of the records of the Atomic Energy Commission. In contrast to the first, or hands-off, reaction, this second reaction assumes the existence of broad governing principles facilitating the transfer of experience from one kind of record to any other.

A third reaction existed in fragile equilibrium with the second in the National Archives. To my astonishment, some of my colleagues both expected and wanted me to erect an archival mystique of scientific records—a body of doctrine stressing the unique nature of the subject matter and the consequent sacred nature of the records. These were then somehow immune to at least part of the normal workings of archival economy. The origins of the pressure for archival mystiques are not mysterious. It is very difficult to avoid interest in bodies of records that one works with. In time this interest yields to fascination and concern. Almost imperceptibly some of us in the National Archives began to think that our administrative concerns were fundamentally more important than those of others; "our" kind of records were therefore somehow special. In my opinion a great deal of the development of the National Archives consists of little more than attempts to bring some rational order to this understandable human tendency.

Perhaps I can better illustrate my position on the role of specialists and specialized bodies of materials by discussing three archival functions in terms of my experiences at the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian Institution. Appraisal, organization and description, and reference are basic concerns, whether you are dealing with the records of science and technology or any other subject area. Are there general principles or only self-contained intellectual enclaves? Or, to raise another possibility, are there crude rules of thumb each specialization uses as tools?

The most striking difference between the National Archives and the Library of Congress in the appraisal or accession function is the life and death powers in the hands of the archivist. Never in my experience at the Library of Congress was I faced with a decision leading explicitly or implicitly to the destruction of manuscript materials. Faced with this godlike responsibility, the National Archives had developed an enormous body of experience and of doctrine on appraisal. I might add here that learning about appraisal and participating in the review of schedules was one of the great experiences of my life. The quality of concern on the most basic of issues in the Archives far overshadows anything I have encountered in other institutions. But the problems raised by the complexity of Federal records simply defy easy solution.

Most nonarchival institutions have a simple but perhaps sound escape from some of the problems of appraisal. They define their collecting scope and then intensively develop their holdings within these defined bounds. A university library may elect to specialize in the history of a region and its own history. Once that decision is taken, appraisal becomes relatively easy. I shall not pause to discuss those collecting institutions with no policy; we still have colleagues who will take in anything that strikes their fancy. It must be fun to pick up the papers of poets, peasants, and physicists; I have never had that pleasure.

The Library of Congress looks to the outsider like a great grab bag of collections but has tried from time to time to channel its collecting into specific areas. By and large its holdings successfully reflect past efforts to concentrate on political history, diplomatic history, and military and naval history. But the Manuscript Division always had significant holdings in other areas—for example, literature and the sciences. In my efforts to develop a collecting program in the history of science, I soon discovered that there was a fundamental similarity in my stance at the Library of Congress and the Archives.

The National Archives took it for granted that the top level records of a scientific agency merited preservation; the Library of Congress took it for granted that a great scientist's papers were worth acquiring. In both institutions the administrative verities were satisfied if I, as the specialist in these arcane matters, certified that certain documents were indeed the records of the director of a scientific bureau or the papers of a Nobel Laureate. Certainly, no expertise in the history of science and technology was required for such determinations. But once you left the top level and its immediate vicinity, then the generalists were lost in my territory. When the archivists faced the records of operating units and the files of projects, when the librarians encountered the papers of men unknown to journalistic fame, then and only then did I truly earn my salary as someone knowledgeable in the history of science and technology. The more marginal a body of records or personal papers is, in terms of established conventions, the more you need staff with specialized knowledge for appraisal and acquisition. And this is true of all fields.

One conclusion from my experience in these matters is that we are all far too prone to view the world from the top. We are far too bemused with the formalities of administration and with the gyrations of the great. There is a real need for the view from the bottom—from the laboratory bench as well as the director's office. I would also make a special plea for great care when facing large bodies of data. Are these indeed fully published? Are they really unusable by a historian of science?

Not too many years ago I visited a university archives and asked about the records of a university research installation. They were in the basement, unarranged and unavailable because of their overly technical nature. On a subsequent visit I was allowed to examine these highly technical sources and found them to consist almost wholly of letters received, including a laundry bill of the director. So overawed were the archives staff by the specialized eminence of their source that they had not even thought of arranging the letters alphabetically or chronologically. When I pointed out how useful such an arrangement might be, they protested that they still would not have the intellectual

capacity to describe the records. I could not convince them that even a brief entry in their catalog was better than no entry at all.

Fortunately, most archivists and curators are not so fastidious. Anything with at least some Roman alphabet text will go through the mill. And the results are often usable, if not perfect. In most situations, the organization and description of records does not really involve any application of a profound specialized knowledge. My friends who worried about the director's laundry bill were confusing two quite different problems.

By far the most basic concern of an archives is the physical organization and physical description of a body of records. This is the bedrock upon which all future analytic work and reference service must rest. Because the physical organization of collections or archival groups has a large element of the routine, there is an unfortunate tendency to underestimate the difficulty of the problems and the trickiness of the techniques involved. You will note that I very deliberately linked the physical organization with the description of records. A great many of the entries in inventories or the descriptions of holdings in historical societies and libraries are not intellectual analyses of bodies of manuscripts. They are literal descriptions of what is on a shelf in the stacks. Simply listing all the signers or addressees of letters, although very useful, does not constitute any significant application of specialized knowledge. Any secretary worth her salt can do that very well.

The distinction between physical and intellectual description is not a matter of sharp definition. Quite obviously, the more a person knows about a particular area, the easier it is to organize and to describe a body of records. And the better the description. What saves archives and libraries in my opinion is that a significant percentage of reference requests is handled adequately by physical descriptions. Any scholar with a respectable degree of competence should want to do his own research and should properly not want to trust the labors of persons unknown to him. If this were not so, archives and libraries would face a hopeless situation. They simply lack the resources to hire all the specialists required in theory.

But I do not want to be quoted in the literature as advocating the barring of specialists from the organization and description of archives and personal papers. There are specialists in archives and libraries; more are needed. But they should not concentrate on physical organization and description. A greater depth of information in descriptions is sorely needed, especially in the larger modern bodies. Let me suggest two criteria for judging whether a description is really that of a specialist. Anyone with a good education can diligently prepare an analysis in depth, but a true product of scholarship will have negative information and concepts not explicitly in the documents. By negative information, I mean that something is lacking that one might reasonably expect in a

collection and, conversely, the description might provide the location of the missing parts. By concepts not explicitly in the documents, I mean that the description will call attention to unexpected or less obvious research possibilities. It is of little use to a historian of science when the description of a collection of the papers of a physicist neglects to mention that these solely concern the administration of the family estate. Nor are we helped by inventory entries couched in terms of administrative processes but omitting word of the presence of significant runs of the letters of domestic and foreign scientists.

As to the reference function, I have recently had the enlightening experience of sending out a large number of individually composed letters to institutions about the possible existence of Joseph Henry materials. And I shall continue to do this for a good many years. About 80 percent of the responses are quite respectable; in a good number of cases, they are a joy to read because of the cooperative spirit and obvious sophistication of their authors. But the remainder are not just poor, they are simply dismally inadequate. I shall not mention any names but, for the record, must add that this pitiful minority includes some very well known organizations.

Two examples will suffice to make my point. I wrote to a university and asked, among other things, whether the papers of X, a Henry friend, who had served for many years as professor of natural philosophy and as president of the distinguished institution, were there. The reply neglected to say whether or not they had anything of X. In reply to another query, a well-known historical society told me that they had no Henry letters, and had I looked up Henry in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections? The interesting thing about this second reply is that the institution was apparently unaware that its catalog did not list every author and recipient of correspondence in its extensive holdings. In a few hours I had little trouble in locating almost 20 pieces of correspondence of Henry's. For this minority of institutions we do not need specialists in the history of science or any other historical field. We need good archivists and good manuscript curators.

I have another way of measuring the sophistication of responses to my queries. Almost invariably, I invite institutions to call my attention to collections worth searching through; I specifically state that we are willing to search every reasonable possibility. Some outfits have responded handsomely; most say nothing. I find it hard to understand why an archives or library with the papers of a scientific contemporary of Henry's would not call them to my attention and invite me to work through the collection.

One explanation that has occurred to me does relate to the role of specialization. Perhaps if I were editing the papers of a political figure, these institutions would feel greater confidence in venturing suggestions.

Another explanation of the pattern of replies to my queries is that some custodians are reluctant to give an accurate picture of their situation. I have the greatest respect for the correspondents who tell me quite frankly that they cannot give me much specific information on Henry materials in their holdings. A more subtle problem is the hesitation over giving negative information. Such information is always rather tentative, so why not limit your reply to those few pieces of Henry's that show up in your catalog or one of the few inventories prepared for the holdings. Again, what I am complaining about is not the absence of historians of science in archives and manuscripts repositories but the lack of good archivists and curators.

One discernible difference between dealing with generalists and specialists in reference is the focus of concern. For the former, it is overwhelmingly on the holdings themselves, often in loving detail. For the latter, the holdings serve as a jumping off point to alternative or related primary sources. Life would become so much easier for me if I had to deal only with my own kind. But please note the moral of this paper: Specialists are a luxury; generalists are a necessity; but my training has equipped me to survive in the absence of both.