

The Historian and the Archivist

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YOUNG though I am, I must confess that I started doing archival research some 23 years ago. Xeroxing was unknown. Most archives prohibited photography; in fact it was impossible to have photographic service unless one brought his own portable equipment. Even typewriters were forbidden. Pens were banned and one came equipped with cards and pencils. I used slips of paper instead of cards on the advice of an older friend. He pointed out that paper slips would last as long as my need for them did. If they fell apart, he said, it would be long after the point at which lapse of time and context had destroyed my right to use them. He was quite correct about this. He is dead now; those notes are now brittle and mostly meaningless. Some of them were never used, and now they never will be because the research is no longer fresh enough. One reason is the fact that note-taking itself took so long; another reason is that those notes were necessarily so fragmentary. Even where typewriters were allowed, the process was often frenetic. One of my compelling memories is that of the early days at Hyde Park, N.Y., when Frank Freidel, Arthur Schlesinger, Bernard Bellush, James McGregor Burns and others crowded the tiny search room of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, compulsively pushing through the thousands of boxes of Roosevelt papers, turning over hundreds of form letters, thousands of pieces of trivia, and typing furiously whenever a genuine item appeared. We shared an obsessive drive to master in a few short years of summers and spring holidays, the manuscript record of a whole era. History, both its heart and its mechanics, was a one man enterprise.

Great work was done, though at overwhelming cost in time and patience, because historians still worked essentially with the techniques of George Bancroft and Jared Sparks and because the archival repository still operated as if history were being written by little old ladies with time on their hands. One of the reasons both Freidel's and Schlesinger's works are still incomplete is the primitive inefficiency with which they have had to work.

The Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and the presidential library system have become pioneers in both efficiency and service. In my own case, I was delighted last year to be able to complete work in 2 weeks that would have taken me a year to perform in 1948, 1949 or 1950.

The author, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences of the university at Burlington, read this paper on Oct. 1, 1968, at the 32d annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Ottawa, Canada.

Partly it was microfilming, which made notetaking both total and instantaneous. And partly it was the result of the 20 years of experience in which the staffs of the presidential libraries have developed techniques for aiding the scholar. Most of the improvements of the last twenty years have been conceived, designed, financed, and directed by the archivists themselves. I do not give way to anyone in either appreciation of or respect for the remarkable things they have done, wherever hard work and imagination could be made to offset the small staffs and inadequate budgets with which we have all suffered.

Still there are suggestions which may be made. One thing is the matter of attitudes. It has not been so long since it was common to find archivists who viewed scholars as rather dangerous and certainly annoying nuisances to be managed as if the very security of the manuscript collection were in danger and scholars who viewed archivists as professional custodians whose defenses had been invented so that historians might try to subvert them. At least this is the way we often looked to each other. Now most of us recognize that we are on a co-operative venture, but the natural tension between trustee and consumer has not been completely relaxed. It reminds me a little of a good lady in the Dean's office who, when asked how many chairs we should have for students in our waiting room, replied, "One; that will be quite enough."

Manuscripts are to be used and we shall use them well when archivists, oral history people, historians and biographers move to the task with the enthusiasm of a team. If this cooperation is to be most effective, the archivist must play an active role. It is not enough to be the keeper of the documents and secrets. In a sense, the archivist's role is that of teacher, defining for his scholar-students the structure and plan of the materials, warning of their limitations, of the gaps, and of the items for the moment being held back, guiding his clients through masses of materials to the general areas in which their hunting may be effective. The scholarly process in recent materials especially requires the service of an "inside" man, who knows what is not there as well as what is, and who has no obligation to "tell all," as much as it does the service of the "outside man" who *does* wish to tell all and therefore may not be allowed to see what he may not tell. It has been my feeling that archivists, in general, have been too detached and neutral. There are, of course, reasons in the law and politics to suggest caution, and the archivist must balance off against each other his service obligation to the historian, his custodial obligation to the donor, and his trustee's obligation to the privacy and good name of those mentioned in the papers under his care. But archivists need not, I think, go as far as they have sometimes gone to avoid trouble. It is not necessary, out of fear of interfering, to allow a historian day after day to blunder away good time on groups of materials which the archivists

could have warned him were worthless. It is not necessary to allow young scholars to flounder for days or even weeks, when a little systematic briefing on the structure of the collection would have put them at work productively and early. It is not necessary to deny the existence of material, simply because it is, for the moment, classified or closed. I must say I do not love the librarians who once encouraged me to take a series of expensive trips for research in the "papers" of Gov. William O. Sulzer, only to find in each case what a responsible archivist could have told me in a minute—that they were worthless collections of congratulatory telegrams. I do not respect those who deny the very existence of papers until the official biography comes out.

The classic extremes, I suppose, are illustrated by the attitude that Cabell Phillips displayed toward the Harry S. Truman Library in his ill-tempered and graceless remarks on that institution, and in the cold, impenetrable resistance with which American scholars have often been met in the Soviet Archives. The Truman Library had been, as usual, gracious and helpful, but it had faced impossible demands; the Soviet Archives has often met the most modest requests with simple silence.

But we historians do understand both the responsibilities and the problems of the archivist. We do not require the kind of quick and custom service that journalists frequently demand. We shall not be angry, as was Mr. Phillips, because the Library could not produce on instant demand everything it had on this or that topic. We shall not, like another journalist, expect a quick, "inside" view of the important things in a 1-day visit, and we shall not, like a third newsman of renown, treat the search room as an office and the telephone facilities as though they were being maintained by well-financed agencies such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration or the U.S. Department of Defense. But we would value, wherever an archival agency can do this for us, the regular and concerned attention of a staff member who can keep us briefed on the nature, structure, and limitations of the material. Some of the archives in which I have worked assign a staff member specifically to each searcher. Though he may thus aid several searchers at once during the heavy summer season, he goes a long way toward bridging the gap between the searcher at his bare table and the rows of archive boxes beyond the swinging doors, even the titles of which he may not view unless he asks for them specifically by item. But, of course, we do not wish to be placed in a situation like that in the Soviet Archives, where access to materials may depend ultimately on the impression one has made upon the archivist in attendance.

I would ask archivists to be frank, direct, and clear. If security agencies have belatedly classified items already in public print, let us know this at once and without confusion. If former President Eisenhower kept some items at Gettysburg, let us be told that without apology. If we don't like this fact, we can be told to go to his family. But we will

dislike this less than we would either misrepresentation or evasion. If groups of papers are worthless, let this be said. If the one significant item in a box is being overlooked by the searcher, let us beg the archivist to point it out to him.

The characteristic searcher is a person often young, almost always lacking both money and time, and often confused about how to start. He very badly needs your help. If he has only 2 weeks to spend in Calgary or Abilene, Berkeley or Halifax, he must begin as quickly as he can, move as efficiently as possible, and use every minute of time. If the archivist can find ways, even at the cost of some daytime service, to make evening and weekend research possible, he will make a major contribution. If a man's money or time allows him only two weeks, the loss of evenings and sometimes even lunch hours and 2 whole days from every 7 is a desperate thing. Furthermore, weekends in Halifax may be charming, but those in Abilene or Poughkeepsie may be a different matter. If the archivist can find ways to move the searcher through the significant material, avoid the trivia, and yet assure the searcher that he has not been kept from anything important, he will make an important contribution.

Another kind of gain the searcher and archivist can make together relates to an understanding of the searcher's interests or problem. A scholar is likely to be interested in a specific topic such as the Budget Bureau under Eisenhower, the Ministry of External Affairs in the McKenzie King era, "questions" in Commons on the Defense Budget, or the speech-editing of Adlai Stevenson. Increasingly, shelf lists, inventories, indexes, and group listings are being developed to help in this sort of situation. But the archivist who will really be called blessed is the one who will be able to help the historian who is working out a whole broad sweep of history. For him, the answer is frequently that he must look at everything. It is a little like trying to make a survey map of Quebec by scaling the timber acre by acre. The historian interested in process as well as policy, broad directions as well as specific items, needs more than anyone else the help of an archivist who has learned the feel as well as the face of the collections.

We have worked well together, archivist and historian, but there are large-scale propositions to which we must now, with urgency, turn our attention:

1. We must speed up the development of techniques for sharing materials and attitudes toward that sharing. If scholars are to live on jets and in airports and spend extensive periods of time in a dozen archives for a single topic, scholarship will be the loser, for research will be narrowed by fatigue, disillusion, and lack of money. It is perhaps a necessary confusion that the historian must go to the Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower Libraries, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress for any topic in postwar policy. But I become downright alarmed at a future filled with 50 uncoordinated State archives and literally hundreds of other collections and at a time when the new discipline of oral history

begins to develop with a purpose of maintaining for each institution a narrow proprietary monopoly for its own materials. Oral history materials should circulate. Filmed exchanges of materials and rapid communications should make each archival repository a terminal of an integrated research system in much the same way that now the terminals of the Dartmouth College or the University of California computer reach hundreds of miles afield to serve a large and dispersed constituency.

2. We must develop better systems for coordinating and managing our total archival resources. Competition is no longer really paying off. In many cases, it is simply raising the prices of collections to outrageous heights. Papers are going begging. I know of a case in New York State in which a major collection with national and State political implications from the era of Bryan to the age of Roosevelt, with the papers of a major business house thrown in, went searching for a home for nearly 15 years before they were finally housed 3 years ago by Syracuse University. I tried to help at one point. I was not shocked that four national institutions that I approached had no room; I was shocked that apparently they did not care. Papers are being made inaccessible. One good example is the case of the history of Huguenot America, about which we know very little because the manuscripts have been allowed until recently to molder in local depositories. Papers are ending up in odd places. We need urgently the sharing of collections. Only a little of this is now being done, but one instructive example is the case of New York State's Al Smith papers, which are on permanent deposit at the Roosevelt Library, where they can be used. We also need a network of regional history facilities like the one at Cornell University, which Edith Fox has so painstakingly built up against strong resistance. Moreover, an increasing specialization of archives and a national catalog and guide to them would serve important research requirements.

3. We need to prepare ourselves for the new archives of the computer age, in which there will be tapes and cards rather than letters and in which we face the danger of total immersion in material so extensive that no one will be able to use it. We shall be forced to make changes, because we are not keeping up with the material or the questions which are being raised or our own conception of our responsibilities.

One of my favorite Vermont stories happened to me down in northern Pennsylvania one autumn afternoon a few years ago when I came upon a farmer cutting wood along a road on which I thought myself to be lost. When I asked him where the road went, he came up to me slowly, looked me square in the eye, and said: "Most anywhere you want to go." A little more pushing on my part and he admitted that, when I got to the intersection, the right hand went north and the left hand south. From there, I was on my own. I finally got to Calicoon, which was where I wanted to go. But this reminds me a bit of our dilemma. We now have the potential to go most anywhere we want to go with research. But we are not sure where that is or just how to get there or how long it is going to take. And we have so much material that we are in danger of being lost in it.

It used to be that historians simply worked the papers of a man and developed the questions that emerged. The archivist kept and made

available the papers. Now the archivist has a right to expect the historian to be more specific in his needs. And I would respectfully submit that the historian has a right to ask the aid of the archivist in getting to where he wants to go, even perhaps in helping him review and re-evaluate his objectives. The historian now is the director of an enterprise that may involve graduate students and other historians, computer technicians, statisticians, social scientists, oral historians, and psychologists. If the archivist does not assume a prominent place in this undertaking, the historian will be in serious trouble.

Fresh Lumber

"There, behind the dusty office desk, you see one of those warped and rusted wheels of our present state machine, scratching away with its stump of a quill, and doing its unceasing best to add fresh lumber to a paper world. Between these files of documents and contracts the hearts of live humanity are pressed like gathered leaves, and fall to powder in these modern torture rooms . . . Here not a ray of light breaks in, here reign eternal night and darkness; and into night and darkness will the whole dissolve."

—Richard Wagner, 1849, quoted in the book *Wagner on Music and Drama*, edited by Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn. Copyright © 1964 by Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn. Reprinted by permission of E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.