

Some Comments on the Archival Vocation

By HERMAN KAHN

MY FRIENDS—it is good to be among friends, and I hope that we will continue to be good friends after you have heard these remarks.

Adlai Stevenson said that the worst thing about running for the Presidency of the United States is that you have to shave twice a day. The worst thing about being the president of this Society or other societies like it is that, as one discovers very shortly after assuming the presidency, the members expect that at the annual meeting at the end of one's term the president will stand before the assembled membership and say something important, something memorable. I quickly became aware of this during the course of the year as I traveled about. I was almost invariably met with the greeting: "Well, have you decided yet what you're going to talk about?" This could have become quite a strain—but this year there was an easy solution to the problem. The subject of this address, insofar as it can be said to have a subject, can be said almost to have selected itself. Everywhere I went I found that my fellow archivists were chiefly concerned with the status of our profession, with its relationship with our fellow professionals in other fields, and with the general questions of where we are going and in what directions we are or should be developing.

I suppose that I have attended my share of these annual meetings of our Society, and each time that I come to one of them and see the wide variety of interests and activities represented, I am always slightly puzzled at what it is that brings us together. In the last analysis, about all we all have in common is that all of us call ourselves archivists. At least we call ourselves archivists while we are at this meeting, but I have frequently been struck by the fact that few of us when asked to identify ourselves in terms of our occupation

Presidential address, given on Thursday, Oct. 1, 1970, at the 34th annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, held in Washington, D.C., Sept. 30–Oct. 2, 1970. Mr. Kahn, Associate Librarian for Manuscripts and Archives and lecturer in history at Yale University is one of the Society's founders and was elected to the rank of Fellow of the Society among the first group of Fellows in 1958. Before his retirement from the National Archives and Records Service in 1968, he had served as Director of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and as Assistant Archivist for Presidential Libraries.

will say: "I am an archivist," as one says "I am a dentist," or, "I am an electrical engineer." This, I suppose, is related to another phenomenon that I have also noticed; among those who call themselves archivists there are very few who are not also something else. This can be confirmed by examining any issue of *Who's Who in America* or the *Directory of American Scholars* or any of the other places where we identify and describe ourselves for the benefit of anyone who may want to know about us. In such places, many of the people whom I see before me tonight do not describe themselves as archivists, but as historians, editors, librarians, educators, analysts, documentalists, information retrieval specialists, audiovisual specialists, government officials, curators, and so on. I have even heard that some of our members have begun to call themselves manuscriptors. (I love all those people, but I do hope that that word dies an early death.) It seems to be true, in other words, that almost every archivist has a divided heart. Whether he is primarily an archivist or primarily something else seems to depend in good part upon where he is and with whom he is speaking.

I am led to dwell on this curious fact by certain developments in the Society of American Archivists during the past two years. Of necessity the officers and Council of this Society have been giving a great deal of thought to the old and sometimes boring questions of who is an archivist, what is an archivist, and how does a person become an archivist? These ancient questions have become peculiarly important in the past few years with the initiation by the Society of American Archivists of its *Placement Newsletter*. Those of you who read that fascinating publication are aware that certain vacancies exist and that those who have the power to fill these vacancies say they want archivists to fill them. They come to the officers of the Society rather plaintively asking: "How do I go about finding a qualified archivist?" "How do I recognize an archivist when I see one?" "When a person applies for this job, how do I know whether he is a qualified archivist?" These are perfectly reasonable questions, because at present there is no valid method of proving that one is an archivist unless one is already in a job that requires him to do archival work.

I suppose it is as a result of these circumstances that our distinguished president of last year, H. G. Jones, has issued a call for the establishment of a large institute devoted solely to training archivists, and this Society is about to undertake what we hope will be a definitive study of such training.¹ The study will be divided into two parts. First, a survey will be made of what is now being done in

¹ H. G. Jones, *The Records of a Nation*, p. 218-222.

this country in the area of formal archival training. Then, I hope, there will be prepared a comprehensive set of recommendations concerning what the training of a qualified professional archivist ought to be. Because the harsh fact is that if we are going to train professional archivists we must first decide what an archivist is and does (or what he ought to do) and by what process people become archivists. This process has always been something of a mystery to me. I have yet to hear of an instance of a small boy or girl saying: "Daddy, when I grow up I want to be an archivist." When I do hear of such a case, I shall know that we have turned a corner. Most of us, of my generation at least, and I believe this is true of the present generation also, trained ourselves to be historians. But then a funny thing happened to us on the way to becoming historians. We decided, mainly for reasons beyond our control, to become professional archivists instead.

Perhaps you will have noted that I have just now introduced the word "professional" as a modifier of the noun archivist. Though there has always been a great deal of discussion of what true archival work comprises, there is one point on which I have never heard any differing opinions. I have never heard any disagreement among us on the point that our occupation is a profession. One hears such constant repetition of the statements that the archival occupation is a profession and that archivists are professionals that I am led to believe that there is some nervousness about it. There seems to be a feeling that constant repetition of the statement that we are professionals will make us so. While pondering this set of facts and even going so far as to consult Webster on what constitutes a profession—and here I found the dictionary of small help—I happened just a few weeks ago to run into a brief history of the academic profession prepared by Prof. Oscar Handlin of Harvard University. Because it has such a direct relationship to the subject I am chewing on here tonight, I want to take the time to quote what he said about the growth and present situation of the academic profession. I do this because archivists seem frequently to believe that if they could only achieve the solid and defined professional status of faculty, all their problems would be over. Please permit me to give you a shortened and slightly paraphrased version of what Oscar Handlin said on this subject:

Teaching on the college level was slow to become a profession in the United States. Through most of the nineteenth century it remained generally the refuge of clergymen without parishes, of young men marking time till they could find a more desirable opening, or of failures in other callings. Signs of professionalism first appeared in the 1870's and developed slowly in the next half century. But only within the present

generation have academic people shown any strength or self-confidence. Until recently the dominant concern of professors was to fend off attack. There was never any attempt to develop standards of competence or malpractice and the academic profession has never defined the duties of a professor. More than fifty years ago the founders of the American Association of University Professors assumed that this would be one of their first tasks. The task remains unperformed. To this day the American Association of University Professors has not explained what would be an acceptable reason for the dismissal of a professor. As a result, in most academic institutions, there are no professional standards. That explains the tolerance on the faculties of large academic institutions of loafers, incompetents, drunkards, and mild lunatics.²

I found this to be a rather heartening statement—heartening in the sense that we are not alone, that our worry about whether we are professionals and about our slow growth toward attainment of the goal of professionalism is far from unique.

Although it is good to know that this is not our problem alone, this knowledge does not get us much farther down the road in dealing with the problem that currently confronts us. In such fields as law, engineering, or medicine, one receives a degree indicating one is a trained professional in that field. It does not, of course, indicate that one is a good lawyer or a good engineer but at least it does help to separate the lawyers from the nonlawyers or the engineers from the nonengineers. Today there is no way of doing this for archivists. So let us return to my original proposition. Archivists are needed, and more of them should be trained. But if we are to set up a program for the training of professional archivists, we must know of what such training should consist, and it is at this point that I get worried.

If you look at the courses and institutes in archival training that are now given in this country, it will readily be observed that for the most part these are what one may call how-to-do-it courses. Fundamentally, most of the training given in these courses does not differ too much from the kind of instruction given in the handyman manuals that are now so popular. Courses in archival training tend to consist largely of practice and instruction in how to arrange records; how to prepare guides, inventories, lists, checklists, and calendars; how to box and label records, how to repair them, how to protect them, how to accession them, how to measure them, and other such workaday matters that are the necessary knowledge of the working archivist. There doesn't seem to be much training given in reference service and research advice—the end purpose of all ar-

² Oscar Handlin, "The Vulnerability of the American University," in *Encounter*, vol. 35, no. 1:22-30 (July 1970).

chival work—or in the appraisal of record values. But these, perhaps the most truly professional aspects of our work, are not easily encompassed by a set of rules.

The kind of knowledge acquired in most of our current training programs is vital for a practicing archivist to have, but is it this kind of knowledge that is the justification for calling ourselves professionals? I think not, and I think that most of you will agree with me that it is not. Let's face it—that kind of technician's or craftsman's skill can be learned by any intelligent and interested adult in a year or two, and it is this fact which has so frequently gotten us into trouble, for we have failed to make it perfectly clear to ourselves and to others, in our talk and in our writings, that it is *not* archival training and experience alone or even primarily that makes a professional archivist. If you think about it, paradoxical as it may sound, most of the truly professional training of an archivist comes *before* he is given any specifically archival training. By this I mean to say the training one receives as an undergraduate and graduate student in history or related subjects, which gives or should give one a knowledge of what scholarship is, what research is, how research is conducted—the relationship of the scholar to his sources, and the uses and limitations of various kinds of sources—the whole story of man, and as a part of that story, how man has used the record in writing his own story—all of those vast areas of human knowledge that make use of the written record—it is when he is being trained in these fields that the potential archivist is receiving the truly professional part of his training. Now, it is true that after having received the professional part of his training, he is still not an archivist. What turns him into an archivist is the final training that he receives in the craftsman's skills I have mentioned. That knowledge laid on top of the deep and solid earlier cultural training creates the archivist.

The point of all this is simply that in our talk about programs for the training of professional archivists, we should make it perfectly clear both to ourselves and to others that any program we are capable of setting up cannot of itself produce professional archivists from persons who have had no other training. All we can hope to do is to take men and women who have the necessary undergraduate and graduate education that is the foundation of any true professional activity and teach them certain skills they will need as archivists. But I repeat those skills alone will not make them archivists, if that word is to have the meaning we all want it to have. And I believe it is worthwhile adding here that in teaching archival skills to these young men and women, we must take care not to give them the impression that (1) an archival career or archival work is entirely

dull, uncreative, and of limited intellectual scope and (2) the kind of work we require of archivists is not commensurate with the level of education that we require of them. I dwell on the point that archival training alone does not create an archivist because I, as all of you, have seen too many truly tragic cases of able men and women who have had little or no training other than on-the-job or off-the-job archival training, who cannot understand why, after having had *only* that training, they are not the peers of others who have had much more than only archival training. Their question is—if I am to be an archivist, why isn't purely archival training sufficient? This is a question to which we should be prepared to give a full and honest answer. That answer is, as I have just said, that archival training alone does not make the professional archivist. This confusion about what makes a professional is not peculiar to our occupation. The U.S. Civil Service Commission struggled for years trying to explain to the many persons in Government classified as bookkeepers the difference between a bookkeeper and an accountant. It was finally found necessary, I believe, merely to say that the difference often lies in what is in the head of each as they begin their work.

There is another parallel that is just as meaningful for us. All of you know that until quite recently in this country it was possible for a man whose only training consisted of, as they used to say, "reading law" in an attorney's office to be admitted to the bar. In other words, a man apprenticed himself to a lawyer and after serving his apprenticeship and mastering the legal craft, was admitted to practice. But despite the fact that thousands of highly competent lawyers were produced in this way, the legal profession no longer believes that true professionals can be created by this method. And one finds today that in the law schools of our great universities radical changes are taking place in the curriculum, with less and less emphasis on training in technical skills and more and more time spent on the history and philosophy of the law. We archivists today are at the point, perhaps, where the legal profession was almost 100 years ago. Like the lawyers, we can strengthen the truly professional aspects of our work only by insisting that learning the craft does not make one a professional.

On this business of being professionals, there are a few more home truths I would like to submit. The first is that if we want others to regard us as professionals, we should start acting as though we ourselves believe ourselves to be professionals. Let me give you an example. It has somehow become a part of contemporary American culture to believe that it is indecent for any institution, agency, project, or program not to have an advisory committee. The care and feeding of advisory committees is, of course, expensive, and the ad-

visory committee as we know it is a byproduct of the affluent society. It is a fine luxury if you can afford it, and I have no objection to it. Some years ago, the National Archives and Records Service, the leading archival agency in this country, suddenly becoming aware of its nakedness in not being adorned with an advisory committee, created the Archives Advisory Council. But notice what happened. This Council, created, presumably, to advise the Archivist of the United States on archival matters and on the management of the National Archives and Records Service, consists of 18 distinguished scholars, and contains exactly one archivist. The rest are historians, political scientists, economists, etc.³ No one has a higher degree of respect, admiration, and affection than I for the former Archivist of the United States and the present Archivist of the United States, both of whom are here tonight. They created this committee, and I think I understand the reasons that have impelled them to create that kind of committee. But those very reasons tell us a great deal about how we archivists regard ourselves in our relationship to other scholars. And personal observation leads me to believe that an 18-man advisory committee for the National Archives which contains one archivist does not create a situation designed to generate respect for the archival profession among other scholars.

Is it any wonder then that about a year ago when the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians created a special joint committee to investigate and report on a complaint of alleged improper conduct by certain archivists, it did not even occur to those organizations that there ought to be an archivist or two on the joint committee, or that the SAA should be represented? When the SAA brought this anomaly to the attention of the historians, the reply was a perfectly honest one—they had simply forgotten about the archivists or that archivists might have anything to contribute. But they have promised not to forget us next time. That may be a little unkind. Actually, a permanent procedure has now been set up between those organizations and the SAA to insure that if there is ever again occasion for such an investigation, the archivists will be represented on the investigating committee. Another aspect of our relationship to other scholars is illustrated by the manner in which historians are recruited to work in archival agencies. As you know, there is now a shortage of teaching positions for newly minted Ph. D.'s in history, and departments of history as a result

³ After this paper was read, James B. Rhoads, the Archivist of the United States, announced that beginning immediately all living ex-Archivists of the United States will hereafter be *ex officio* members of the Archives Advisory Council. He pointed out that this would increase the representation of professional archivists on the Council by 100 percent, that is, the number would be increased from one to two.

have begun to show a new interest in the possibilities of nonacademic employment for historians. But, again, notice how this possibility is presented to the historians. They are not told that there are several fields where they can use their historical training—that they have a choice of careers. Rather, it is usually put to these students looking for employment that if they cannot possibly find a teaching position in any college or university, they may want to consider applying for employment in an archives, a library, a museum, or some other organization where their historical training will be valuable.

Another aspect of acting as if we believe ourselves to be professionals involves our taking an interest in and making some contribution to the larger aspects of the role that recordmaking, recordkeeping, and recordusing plays in our society. This requires us to do something much more difficult and painful than merely preserving, arranging, describing, and making available the manuscripts and archives in our charge. It requires us to do some thinking and enter into and make our influence felt in the discussion of the important issues now being publicly debated in connection with the use of records.

Let me give you another example. All of you must have read in the papers of the uneasiness, then confusion, then furor that arose last July when it was learned that agents of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) were asking various public libraries to give them information from their circulation records about who had been borrowing certain kinds of books. There was widespread indignation about this, but nowhere did I see any reasoned analysis of the principles of law and ethics involved. Ask yourselves this question—suppose that there was no records administration program in your city to insist on the quick destruction of these useless records, and suppose further that they had been transferred to a municipal archives. On what grounds could or should an archivist have refused the IRS or anyone else permission to use public library circulation records? Public libraries are tax supported institutions, and their records, I suppose, are as public as it is possible for records to be. Further, we do not ordinarily keep our reading habits a secret. We tell others of the books that we have been reading and display those books in our homes. Yesterday we heard an awe-inspiring address from Howard Zinn in which we received some advice from a historian on archival matters. In the peroration to his address Dr. Zinn, as I recall it, called upon archivists to take a stand for the opening up of all public records, everywhere, at once, to anyone who wanted to see them for any purpose. I take it from this that Dr. Zinn would have no objection to the use of records of public libraries to compile lists of the names of people who had been

borrowing large quantities of left-wing books and periodicals. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not attempting to defend or condone the action of the IRS in this matter, but here we have a very simple example of an extremely thorny problem to which archivists, as part of their professional activities, should be giving a great deal of thought.

We have seen much in the press during the past year or two about the dangers to our privacy arising from the fact that government and private industry at all levels are now collecting, recording, and storing vast amounts of information about each one of us. Whether we like it or not, it is in the nature of the civilization we have created that the practice of gathering and recording personal information about private individuals is going to increase, not decrease. What is the meaning of this for archivists? We still lay claim to our right to take custody of all records as soon as they become noncurrent. If we continue to insist on this practice, it will inevitably mean that archivists will be more and more drawn into this question of the right to privacy as opposed to the widely asserted right of the public to have access to all publicly created and maintained records. Had it been a newspaper reporter rather than the IRS who had requested and been denied access to public library circulation records, one can easily imagine the screams that would have arisen about stupid and dictatorial bureaucrats interfering with the people's right to know. My only point in introducing this very large subject is to indicate the kind of problem we must begin to think and write about if we are really to build and maintain for ourselves a position as a true profession.

I would like to see archivists as a profession raise their voices in connection with all matters of public policy affecting records and manuscripts in our society. For instance, I would like to see the SAA undertake a careful study of the tax aspects of donating personal papers to public institutions, a matter about which we are all now much exercised. Another question that lies at the very heart of everything we do is the quality of the official records now being maintained at every level of government. There has been much talk in recent years about the harmful effect of the telephone and the airplane on the fullness and richness of the record, and yesterday we heard a talk from a distinguished historian, Daniel Boorstin, in which he mentioned this matter. My own conviction is that there has been a decline in the qualities of frankness and honesty in our records to a considerable degree because of the great pressure to make everything immediately available to historians and journalists who want to do historical writing about what happened yesterday, last month, or last year. If there is any subject to which professional archivists should be giving attention it is this matter of the *research*

quality of the records now being created as compared with those of let us say 100 years ago. Why should we not undertake some studies—and it would be possible—of that subject? If we are more than mere custodians, the research quality of the records we have in our custody should be one of our prime concerns.

The word custodian leads me to another observation. I do not know how many of you are aware that just about 20 years ago this Society made application for membership in the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS). The reply was—and here I am relying on my memory—that the ACLS was of the view that it should not admit to its membership what it referred to as the “custodial professions.” The special and rich irony of this incident is that the director and leading spirit of the ACLS for almost 30 years had been our own, beloved Waldo Gifford Leland, whose most noteworthy publications were the invaluable archival guides with which we are all familiar, who had served a two-year term as president of this Society shortly after it was organized, and whose portrait hangs in the conference room of the National Archives Building in tribute to the great debt owed to him by all of us. I suppose that the question we must ask ourselves is: “What has happened in the last 20 years in this Society or in our profession—what changes or developments have taken place—that could today help us persuade the American Council of Learned Societies that we are now eligible for membership in that organization?” I have spent some time here talking about the training and education of archivists and the decisions the Society is going to make on those matters in the next year or two. I am convinced that those decisions will be critical in determining whether we are going to take the path that leads toward our becoming permanently a “custodial profession” or whether we are going to take the steps that will lead us down the road toward becoming a learned profession.

I have just a few more words to say. All of us know that the last year or two has been a period of great ferment, debate, and critical questioning within our Society. Numerous critics and dissenters among us question what the Society has been doing and wish it to do many things that it does not do. I find this criticism and internal debate an encouraging thing; it is an unmistakable sign that ours is a healthy, vigorous organization. Indeed, if all were quiet and calm—if there were no questioning criticism—there would be a cause for serious worry, as it would be an indication of decline and decay. The spirited exchange of views between various groups in our membership, on the other hand, are signs of vigor, health, and growth. I can assure you all, from what I have seen as a result of a year’s service as your president, that you need have no fears about the future of this Society.