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REVIEWS

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Articles and Related Communications: Edward Weldon, Editor, the *American Archivist,* The National Archives, Washington, D.C. 20408.

Advertising Correspondence: Wilbur G. Kurtz, Jr., Coca-Cola Co., P.O. Box 1734, Atlanta, Ga. 30301.

Membership and Subscription Correspondence: Robert M. Warner, SAA Executive Director, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich. 48105. *Notice of nonreceipt of an issue must be sent to the secretary by domestic subscribers within four months of issue publication date and by international subscribers within six months.*

Back Issue Orders: Howard L. Applegate, SAA Treasurer, The Balch Institute, 1627 The Fidelity Bldg., 123 So. Broad St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19109.

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The Forum

Communications from Members

Here I develop my remarks made on November 1, 1972, at the conclusion of the business meeting of the Society of American Archivists. The hour was late. My remarks were brief and differed in content and style from discussion in the business meeting which preceded. It seems they were inadequately understood, both by members who agreed and by those who disagreed with their substance. I now try again in a more adequate forum.

My concern is that members of the Society may have confused organizational streamlining with the resolution of basic problems. The business meeting consisted of amending the constitution and bylaws of the Society in accordance with the recommendations of the Committee for the 1970's. This committee had responded to dissatisfactions with the Society and to less specific malaise by inviting a broader range of interests to work through the Society's structure and by democratizing the organization in other respects. The organizational streamlining is commendable. It squares the Society with contemporary styles by opening the organization to greater membership participation. This accommodation, strongly supported by those attending the business meeting, appeared to neutralize dissatisfaction and thereby contributed to organizational survival. At the same time, the organizational streamlining probably created a more favorable climate for addressing problems, at once controversial and basic, which were in limbo when the organization was more narrowly defined. I don't suggest that there has been a conscious avoidance of serious problems. The situation, rather, was one of adaptation between a narrowly defined organizational structure and the problems which have occupied the archival profession in recent years almost to the exclusion of all others, namely those problems of physical and intellectual control of documentation. In this connection note the twenty-three page bibliography for 1970, "Writings on Archives, Current Records, and Historic Manuscripts," compiled by Isabel V. Clarke.[1] Less than one page is needed to list writings dealing with controversial subjects, namely those concerning uses of archives and historical manuscripts and policies concerning use. No space was needed to list writings dealing with guidelines for the acquisition of archival and manuscript materials.

The lack of professional concern about such guidelines is the crux of

1 *American Archivist*, 35 (July/October 1972): 378–402.

what may be the most serious problem facing archivists and manuscript curators: the politicalization of our profession. Here I use politicalization without partisan connotation; my concern is skewing the study of culture by the studied preservation of unrepresentative indicators of that culture. The most pronounced case of skewing is the preservation of vast holdings of government records, particularly of the national government, in the absence of collections which take comparable account of other aspects of culture. Granting that government serves serious functions, it is difficult to argue that its impact on culture is commensurate with the proportion of government records among the totality of records preserved. The condition is self-perpetuating. In the Canadian and U. S. cultures, the market for accounts about public officials is probably superior to that for any subject, with the possible exceptions of sex and sports. In the process of servicing this market, authors built reputations, and vast publishing efforts enhanced subjects of study and incomes. In turn, demand was created for more government records. On the other hand, organizations which have a vast impact on culture, most notably families, are poorly documented, and much of the documentation which exists occurs through the aegis of government for purposes of government.

While maintaining this passive stance toward acquisitions guidelines, archivists might reflect that the politicization of the profession did not happen by chance. Rather it was unintentionally invited four decades ago when archivists and historians interested in access to records of the national government joined in a successful effort to establish the National Archives. One could argue that the present generation of archivists and manuscript curators has a responsibility to redress the balance.

It can also be argued that documentation of culture is not the business of the archivist and manuscript curator, and considered argument on that subject would be timely. However, until the functions of manuscript curators and archivists are more thoroughly weighed and the politicization of the profession better understood, the profession would do well to exercise great care before formally endorsing activities which could further bias the documentation of culture. A recent statement by Charles E. Lee regarding a national historical records program serves to illustrate a point at which caution is indicated. To call for "designation of a national agency to set standards for a national historic documents program" involves a number of assumptions about the extent to which standardization is desirable in the preparation of history. The standardization of finding aids through federal patronage that occurred through the National Union Catalog of Manuscripts is vastly different from the standardization of acquisitions. I would like to think that Mr. Lee had in mind finding aids rather than acquisitions, but he gives me pause by associating his recommendation with celebrating the "200-year viability" of "the American system".[2] Also troublesome is a draft

2 "President's Page: The Proposed National Historic Records Program," *American Archivist,* 35 (July/October 1972): 373.

bill, apparently approved by the Society of American Archivists, which would create a national historic records commission to, among other purposes, "give a sense of orientation to the American people."[3]

Documentation of culture is further skewed by the orientation of archivists and manuscript curators towards waste material. In their custody, records no longer useful for purposes they were designed to serve become valued sources of history, because what is accessible is what history is based upon. Cultural aspects which don't make records are likely to be as lost to history as is the Roanoke Island Colony. The WPA Writers Project, which recorded the reminiscences of former slaves, should be recognized for what it is, an aberration in documentation.

Let me illustrate this point by reference to American agriculture, a subject with which I have some acquaintance. Documentation on this aspect of culture is impressive wherever the U.S. Department of Agriculture or the Bureau of the Census chose to collect statistics; for subunits of that culture (to the extent political divisions constitute subunits) there is impressive documentation under the aegis of state departments of agriculture and colleges of agriculture. Since the bulk of this documentation is concerned with business aspects of agriculture, it is hardly surprising that these records commonly yield the interpretation that farmers produce food for a larger number of nonfarm people while enjoying an increasingly impressive standard of living. The frequently drawn conclusion seems to follow: the American farmer continues to farm because he is attracted by the high standard of living. However, this conclusion follows in a virtual vacuum of documentation concerning the social aspects of agriculture. Winter games of pitch and pinochle at the local cafe; satisfactions through association with animals and in working with younger members of the family and with building an enterprise over generations; the joy of being present as natural phenomena unfold; and freedom from time clocks and bosses are also involved. Considering the American farmer through the perspective of broader documentation produces a less simple and less misleading view of this aspect of culture.

Further evidence of bias in the documentation of culture may be found by examining how oral history has been used. Oral history, in contrast to the collection of existing records, generates new source material. The advent of the tape recorder has made it possible to document, on a large scale, elements of culture which do not generate their own documentation. However, with few exceptions the technique has been used to document aspects of culture which are already relatively well documented. The fact that these aspects of culture are the ones which can pay the cost of documentation, either directly by means of institutionally sponsored projects or indirectly by supplying source material for an established market, does not change the bias.

Robert M. Warner, in connection with a recent survey of archival training in the United States and Canada, notes that "archivists today seem to

[3] Ibid., p. 374.

concentrate more on being the link between primary sources and the historian rather than on being scholars endeavoring to build comprehensive documentary collections. . . ."[4] If that is the case, the blind are leading the blind, because advice from historians will invariably reflect a combination of two elements: the historian's outlook, which results from the blending of personality with assimilated culture, and the character of the current research scene, which, in turn, is determined by what will move in the scholarly marketplace, whether the market is a commercial press or a professional journal. It seems appropriate for archivists and manuscript curators to ask whether or not acquisition guidelines, so thoroughly bound to the present, are sufficient to document culture.

In another respect, the historian's limited experience with the sequential nature of time makes him an inadequate adviser about acquisitions. While the historian is concerned with two time segments, the present where he lives and whose occupants he addresses and that portion of the past in which he specializes, the archivist and manuscript curator are faced with documenting all segments of the past associated with written records in order that they meet the needs of researchers in an open-ended future. Thus historians can perform their function with only limited acquaintance with the time dimension of human experience, while archivists and manuscript curators cannot be so limited if culture is to be documented.

Now it may be that archivists and manuscript curators are bonded to their cultural settings and contemporary marketplaces as tightly as historians; consequently, the possibility of documenting culture may be slight. If so, are there satisfactions to be found in considering strategies for making the attempt? I think that several forms of satisfaction may be expected from the effort: mental stimulation associated with putting problems of physical and intellectual control of documentation into context and, by considering criteria for documenting culture, aid to individual repositories in developing acquisitions guidelines. Rather than attempt to standardize such criteria, I presume that their leverage in the profession should rest on the case made for their application.

Cornell University GOULD P. COLMAN

[4] Robert M. Warner, "Archival Training in the United States and Canada," *American Archivist*, 35 (July/October 1972): 353.