

The Administration of Archives A Review

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PUBLICATION OF A NEW MONOGRAPH ON archives administration normally should be greeted with enthusiasm by archivists everywhere and particularly by those involved in archival education and training. Much of the literature of our rapidly changing profession is scattered in a wide variety of publications, and we are notably lacking in general works that deal with both theory and practice and that describe and explain archival activity, past and present. This volume, however, does very little to fill the void.

The author, J. H. Hodson, is a member of the Department of Palaeography of the University of Manchester, and his book, which is based upon a course of lectures given in the Department of Librarianship in the Manchester College of Commerce, has been published as volume 15 of the International Series of Monographs in Library and Information Science. It is particularly unfortunate that this work should be selected to represent our discipline, since in conception and execution it falls far short of an adequate treatment of archives administration in even the author's own country.

This is the general conclusion of two of Hodson's colleagues, Edwin Welch, now teaching archives administration in Canada, and Felicity Ranger, of the Historical Manuscript Commission, both of whom have already published highly critical reviews. The volume's

A frequent contributor to the *American Archivist* and co-editor of the International News and Abstracts Department, the author is a Fellow and former Council member of the Society of American Archivists. He has taught courses and institutes on archives administration for the past decade and currently serves as assistant to the Archivist of the United States. The book he examines here is J. H. Hodson, *The Administration of Archives*, volume 15, *International Series in Library and Information Science*, G. Chandler, general editor. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1972. xv, 217 pp. £5.50.)

dust jacket—inappropriately decorated with the outline of a stack of books—tells us that the work “sums up the author’s fifteen years’ experience of archive administration in three types of record repository: county, public library and university.” Welch, whose own views are quoted and commented upon by Hodson in several chapters, informs us in his review that the author’s experience has been “restricted to three repositories which can only be described as atypical of English record offices in general,” and that “for nearly a decade, Mr. Hodson has not been a practicing archivist, but a lecturer at the University of Manchester so that he knows little, except what he has read, of the new developments in English record offices during the past five years.” Having corrected the author and discussed the inadequacies of this work in a number of particulars, Welch concludes, contrary to the publisher’s blurb, that “this is certainly not a book to be placed in the hands of ‘students of librarianship and library science, librarians, record officers, intending . . . archivists.’”¹

Felicity Ranger’s critique is equally severe. After discussing the great opportunity available to the author because of the vacuum left by the death of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, she indicates that the least Hodson could be expected to produce would have been “an adequate and orthodox account of archival theory and practice as it exists in the early 1970’s.” But this, she maintains, “he can hardly be said to do.” Not only is he “out of date,” having made no real effort to discover what had happened in the five-year period between the date of his lectures and their publication, but apparently he did not bother to consult those whom he criticized (“almost all living and active archivists”) for what he regarded as “inconsistency or evasion in published pronouncements.” They might have provided him with explanations, she maintains, “and allowed him to avoid the tone of myopic nit-picking and delight in scoring off people better known than himself which permeates the book.”² One of the author’s favorite targets is Ranger’s long-time associate, Roger H. Ellis. Obviously, Ellis needs no one to defend his career and his professional views against an aggressive critic, but the author’s style and tone is so provocative that Welch also feels it is necessary to protest against this treatment of “one of England’s best living archivists.”³

Ranger takes particular exception to the author’s “endless pleasure” in tripping up Jenkinson with contradictions in his own writings. While acknowledging this as a “perfectly legitimate occupa-

¹ *Canadian Archivist*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1972): 45–46.

² *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 4, no. 7 (April 1973): 620–21.

³ *Canadian Archivist*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1972): 46.

tion, even if one in questionable taste and of dubious value," she finds it a "wholly negative one" since while Hodson "can deflate, even destroy," he "offers nothing positive or constructive in place of what he demolishes." The first section of the book, which the author labels "Theory," Ranger characterizes as containing "very little theory and a great deal of narrative history of a blatant scissors and paste kind." In brief, it is "little more than a summary of what others have written more cogently but at greater length elsewhere." The remainder of the work, on "Practice," reveals, according to Ranger, that the author's "own experience is too limited for the task he has set himself." His emphasis is on deposited family and estate papers to the neglect of modern institutional and organizational records. Ranger concludes that the book is "derivative and second-hand, and has neither the scope nor the authority that its title implies."⁴

It is not likely that additional reviewers will contribute significantly to the assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this volume with regard to archives administration in England. A more appropriate forum for the author's criticism of his colleagues—whether better known than himself or not, and without regard to the tone and style of the criticism—would be those journals where their views originally appeared and where they would have the opportunity for a more convenient reply. Hodson's book, however, was not intended exclusively for British archivists. Its title indicates that it deals with archives administration in general, and it should also be evaluated within this broader frame of reference.

Viewed as a general monograph on archives administration, the basic weakness of this work is the author's conception—or disregard—of what constitutes "theory" and "practice." The first six chapters, on theory, deal with, respectively, "The Nature of Archives"; "Archives in England," an historical sketch centering on the Public Record Office and the Historical Manuscripts Commission; "The Archives Scene," which traces the development of a multiplicity of repositories and argues their merits; "The Archives Profession," chiefly on education, training, and the archivist as scholar; "Modern Archives and Business Archives," which deals in a very superficial manner with modern problems of selection for preservation, or appraisal, to use the American term; and "Archives in Libraries." Each of these chapters after the initial one does touch at various times upon archival theory, but, in each, theory is generally incidental to a discussion of other matters. The remaining eight chap-

⁴ *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 4, no. 7 (April 1973): 621.

ters, grouped under the term "practice," are entitled "Bringing in the Archives," "Designing an Archives Depository," "The Enemies of Archives," "Shelves and Boxes," "The Arrangement and Description of Archives," "Repair," "Reprography" and "The Educational Use of Archives." This section deals with what we may term basic archival functions, but these functions are firmly rooted in archival theory—or should be—and the author's artificial separation of theory and practice tends to obscure this essential relationship.

The value of the work is further diminished by Hodson's remarkably narrow provincialism. Whatever the limitations of his personal experience and training, there should no longer be any acceptable excuse for a general work that is based almost exclusively upon British writings plus T. R. Schellenberg's two books. The author's notes include but a single citation to *Archivum* and one to W. R. Hawken's *Copying Methods Manual*. The volume includes a fifteen-page select bibliography of books and articles used in its preparation. This bibliography lists no American publications and not a single article from the *American Archivist*. The author does cite reviews of several American publications in British journals, but the desirability, if not the necessity, of consulting the original publications apparently did not occur to him. Hodson is at least consistent in his selectivity; although his bibliography, with the exception of two items on buildings, is confined to writings in the English language, it is totally lacking in any writings published in Canada, Australia, South Africa, or anywhere else in the world but England, except for several publications by the International Council on Archives.

Hodson's initial chapter is a rather curious one that tells us at least as much about the author as it does about the nature of archives. He begins by comparing Jenkinson's 1922 definition of archives, as modified by some of Jenkinson's later writings, with the definition offered in 1956 by Schellenberg, to the distinct disadvantage of Jenkinson. The author attempts to reconcile the conflicting views, but for some unexplained reason he does not permit Jenkinson to speak for himself. In Jenkinson's last completed literary work, an article entitled "Roots," which the author cites in his select bibliography, Jenkinson addressed himself directly to Schellenberg's definition and explained at length his own position.⁵ Hodson ignores Jenkinson's statement, and the result is a distorted account of the basic disagreements between these two major figures in modern archival history.

Hodson is apparently unaware also of the fact that Schellenberg's

⁵ Sir Hilary Jenkinson, "Roots," *ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 4 (October 1961): 131-38.

frequently dogmatic views regarding archival theory and practice, views that were developed primarily out of his experience with federal government records, have never been accepted by many American archivists, and particularly not by those whose experience has been primarily with personal papers and the records of private institutions and organizations. Hodson apparently does not recognize the extent to which Schellenberg's *Management of Archives* represented an effort to placate librarians of whom he had been so critical in his earlier writings. In reality, Schellenberg's reputation and influence abroad have always been much greater than his influence in the United States. His two books continue to be used in our training courses—less because they contain the essence of generally accepted American archival theory and practice than because they are the *only* works available that are relatively comprehensive and systematic in their coverage, and thus furnish a convenient point of departure.

Equally questionable is the author's emphasis upon the "impartiality" of archives. He endorses the view, based upon his reading of Jenkinson and Schellenberg, that, provided the student "understands their administrative significance," archives "cannot tell him anything but the truth" (p. 3), and that as "the product of activity," unlike literary manuscripts which are "personal, subjective," archives are "impersonal, unself-conscious" (p. 4). Among the "practical implications" Hodson draws from this peculiar quality is that "because archives are unself-conscious by-products of human activity, they have the objective formlessness of raw material, compared with the subjective mindedness of literary artifacts like books, whether printed or manuscript" (p. 4).

On this point many archivists will part company with Jenkinson, Schellenberg, and Hodson. However "unself-conscious" administrative processes may become, the records received and created by institutions are nevertheless the conscious product of human beings, and as such, the records are susceptible to the same human qualities and failings that characterize the content of other literary documents. Anyone who has used archives, public or private, for historical research can readily recall examples of reports that rationalize failures, studies that are self-serving, memoranda pre-dated (and written out of the special wisdom of hindsight), statistics selected and laundered to substantiate preconceived or bureaucratically preferred conclusions, and key documents that are missing. In fact, a cynic might well conclude that all too frequently the impartiality of archives is in inverse proportion to the importance of the matters with which they deal. To maintain seriously the inherent

and total impartiality of archives requires an act of faith that borders on naiveté.

One final point deserves our notice regarding Hodson's exposition of the nature of archives. In his preoccupation with comparing and contrasting the views of Jenkinson and Schellenberg, he manages even to avoid using the terms *provenance* or *respect des fonds*, and he only indicates the meaning, not the origin or the significance, of *respect pour l'ordre primitif*. There are so few basic "principles" in our profession that anyone familiar with the literature, let alone the author of a monograph on the subject of archives, should be expected at least to recognize and indicate the significance of those principles which have achieved international acceptance.

From the meaning of archives Hodson turns to a variety of topics that deal less with theory than with the history of archival activity, archival repositories, and the archival profession in England. Except for errors and omissions noted by reviewers Welch and Ranger, the historical sketches are useful, if not original. Whether to add interest to his narrative or for some other reason, Hodson tends to magnify differences in the emphasis and the views expressed by individual archivists on a number of problems; he chooses to call these differences "dichotomies in the profession" (p. ix). His approach perhaps can best be illustrated by his division of "the field" regarding views on "the function of the archivist" between "traditionalist preservers" and "exploiting modernists" (p. 46). On the important matters of education and training he contributes very little and omits much that could and should be said. His own view, in one of the few instances where he expresses one, is that "archives provide a satisfying career for practical and popularizing scholars" (p. xiv), a statement that raises more questions than it answers.

In discussing modern and business archives, Hodson summarizes "elimination" or disposition policies and procedures before and after the Grigg Committee report, and he describes the experience of the British government with scheduling. He does not, however, discuss the problems involved in sampling modern records or in appraising records which contain personal and business information of a confidential nature. His brief account of the impact of the computer on traditional record systems is concerned almost exclusively with accounting records. On the subject of archives in libraries the author closely follows Schellenberg's views but leaves unanswered the question of whether the actual custodian should be a librarian or an archivist.

The remaining chapters of this work, grouped under the term "practice," relate to basic archival functions as they are performed

in particular repositories in England. Since the documentary heritage of each country is unique, as is every archives, practice will necessarily vary with every body of material. There are, however, a number of basic problems and concerns that are common to archival practice everywhere, and Hodson's treatment of some of these is quite inadequate. On "Bringing in the Archives" he has some interesting views on collecting materials, but on receiving archives on a regular schedule from a predesignated "records creator," to use Schellenberg's language, Hodson tells us practically nothing. The matter of deeds of gift, deposits, and restrictions is disposed of in one brief paragraph (p. 82), while more attention is given to the practice of insuring deposits of records.

To the designing of an archives repository he devotes less than $3\frac{1}{2}$ pages, but to the "Enemies of Archives," 19 pages. Even here, his discussion in detail of the dietary preferences and nocturnal habits of nine different types of one of the "insidious" enemies, insects, is much too detailed for a general work yet not specific enough to serve as a substitute for the technical literature on which it is based. The same criticism can be made of his chapters on shelves and boxes, repair, and reprography. Instead of defining problems and indicating and weighing the merits of alternative solutions, Hodson prefers to seek out seemingly conflicting statements in the literature or to belabor the reader with dimensions and specifications for specialized equipment or supplies.

His chapter on arrangement and description serves chiefly to reveal the extent to which he has failed to comprehend American theory and practice in these areas. He asserts that "arrangement embraces accessioning and classification; description involves cataloguing (of various types) and indexing" (p. 119), and then he describes the procedures used in the classification of the Middleton family archives in the Nottingham University Department of Manuscripts. The description corresponds to what is termed *processing* in most American manuscript repositories, except that he ends by arranging "groups" within a "collection" in alphabetical order, "very likely beginning with accounts" (p. 128). We are presented with liberal quotations from Jenkinson and Schellenberg on the importance and content of inventories, descriptive lists, guides, and calendars, but since the author does not understand what Oliver W. Holmes has termed the five levels of arrangement, he is unable to indicate the most appropriate type of description for a particular level of arrangement. Some of this material, without the examples, could better have been placed with the section on theory. The final chapter, on the educational use of archives, deals with exhibits and

particularly with "archive teaching units," a development which Hodson seems to favor. The nine-page index is quite adequate for this slim volume.

It is customary for a reviewer to comment also upon an author's style of writing. Hodson's is generally pleasing, even entertaining, but at times it becomes a little strained. For example, when describing the archival situation in England in the years immediately following World War II, he writes: "In sunny search rooms the dusty tang of freshly opened parchment tingled the nostrils of youthful acolytes of a new order, zested by a delicious pot-pourri of newly burgeoning antiquity, purposeful scholarship, educational altruism, and sensitive organization" (p. xiv).

There is much that can be learned from this work, and not the least of the lessons is that very few sets of lecture notes deserve to be dignified by publication as a monograph.

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