

What, Then, Is There To Theorize About?

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WHY DOES MANKIND create records and preserve them? The answer is carved in monumental stone: "What is past is prologue." This sophisticated motto, with its tone of universality, proclaims a perennial purpose, an irrefutable sequence, whether it be in the functioning of government, in the operation of private enterprise, or in the daily life of the person impelled by necessity or desire. Recorded experience, useful in countless ways, indispensable for some purposes of temporary or long-term value, soon becomes historical. The aphorism "No records, no history" is axiomatic, for these are the sources of history—written documents for the most part, but including oral documentation and artifacts of man's making, past and present. If this exposition addresses the theory concerning the creation and preservation of records, it may suggest how intimately related are the theoretical and the practical, and how critical is the responsibility of the old-

time "keeper" who has become the archivist.

The question "What, then, is there to theorize about?" lies at the heart of the propositions and arguments of archivist and historian Frank G. Burke in "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States."¹ A brief review of the pragmatic course of practice and theory may provide perspective for his plea for archival theory.

As the public records of the American colonies, and in turn of the United States, have their antecedents in those of Great Britain, so some precedents in the accumulation and preservation of British records and their transformation into archives provide perspective in comprehending principles and practice, along with such theory as may be identified. In "Confessions of an Archivist," V.H. Galbraith, who was an assistant keeper of the records toward the end of the first century at the British Public Record Office (established in 1838),

¹Frank G. Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *The American Archivist* 44 (1981): 40-46.

defined archival records as "a quarry for research" in two respects: first, concerning their size and bulk, and second, regarding "the organic structure of the records" as a "unique distinction." Although some documents had been irretrievably separated from the original files,

yet in general and collectively they record systematically the development of the central government—the State in fact—since the year 1199, and rather less coherently since Domesday Book (1086). In this respect they have been compared to "secretions of an organism," [but]. . . I would rather . . . liken them to an old house which has been continually enlarged and altered through the centuries, but which is still lived in.²

This archival precept of organic structure as indispensable for preservation and use of the records was implied in the early seventeenth century by Thomas Powell, a solicitor general under James I, in his *Direction for the Search of RECORDS in the Chancery, Tower, Exchequer, with the Limnes thereof: viz. Kings Remembrancer, Lord Treasurers Remembrancer, King's Bench, Common Pleas. . . With the accustomed Fees of Search: and diverse necessarie observations* (London, 1622). Powell advised the reader that "Bookes, Medicines, and Lawes should never be publisht, or prescribed, but as Obilters, to meete with Evils imminent; ever applyed, and ever complying with the present necessitie." In conclusion he made passing mention concerning the "Customes, Liberties, or Priviledges of Cities, and Townes Corporate: which your Libraries Keeper, or

other Officer, who keeps the Treasurie of all the same Records in their common Guild-Hall, can only shew you."³

In the *Direction* one finds hints of classification of records by function: in this manner they accumulated in each department or bureau during the course of transaction of official business; through this procedure (hardly a planned "system") they could be consulted with a modicum of efficiency; and thus became established the observance of *provenance* in the keeper's administration of the records with its concomitant *respect des fonds*. From common-sense practice developed this abiding, doubly significant principle of archival administration, which proved advantageous likewise in eventual use of the records for historical research. Provenance served to authenticate the records as primary sources and to attribute to them a moral sanction in terms of their origin. Reinforcing this principle was the fact of custody in the office of origin or its legitimate successor: the archivist in his office was the ultimate heir. Through this succession, unbroken custody was maintained and the "secular sanctity" of the records as *archives* was established, literally from the beginning. By this means the *truth* of the records is confirmed: the concern is with not the substance of the texts, but, rather, the genuine origin and continuous preservation of the records. This truth is the essence of archival theory.

Burke, in his essay, purports to deal with the "future course of archival theory," focusing on conditions in the United States. His terminology, however, is confusing and at times ambiguous. Because of Burke's mixing of archival theory and theory of history,

²V.H. Galbraith, *Studies in the Public Records* (London: T. Nelson, 1948), pp. 1-3. See also his *An Introduction to the Use of the Public Records* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1934), pp. 1-14.

³Thomas Powell, *Direction for the Search of Records*, pp. [ix], 77-78.

the reader “look[s] through a glass darkly,” while the author acknowledges that, at best, the future is “clouded; at worst totally obscured.”⁴ Theory embraces principles. Overarching archival principles emerged empirically, and from them specific rules have been shaped and modified for administering the records, the whole giving proof of a philosophy of archives for the advancement of knowledge.

Burke confuses “laws” that “are not immutable” with principles, even classifying the *Registaturprinzip*⁵ as a law, a surprising contradiction of terms. Because what Burke calls laws are of European derivation, he maintains that “American archivists, therefore, have little or no claim to the development of any archival theory.”⁶ He lists the “great early thinkers of the American archival world” and finds each of them wanting in this respect. However, he has overlooked Waldo G. Leland, the so-called “dean of American archivists,” who was deeply concerned with fundamental principles.⁷ Although he never held an archival position,⁸ Leland prodded his associates to be aware of principles as the guide to practice. Perhaps one can find cold comfort in Burke’s conclusion that to date there has been little elucidation of archival theory, “if any, in the rest of the world.”⁹ Leland’s role in the formulation of archival theory may be instructive.

By and large, the archivist is at heart an historian. Before the days of the professional archivist, the prevailing investigator of the records was the historian, aided by the like-minded curator. In fact, in some states the official archival agency was identified as the Department of Archives and History,¹⁰ in others as the Historical Commission.¹¹ Some of these agencies did not restrict their acquisitions to official records. The pragmatic concept of archives for history’s sake overshadowed the archival principle that official records are created for administrative purposes, not primarily for the service of history. This principle had been enunciated by Dutch archivists in the late 19th century and translated and adapted successively into German, French, and Italian; but it did not become available in English translation for Americans, deficient in foreign languages, until a half-century later.¹²

As archival activity increased in the United States, the American Historical Association sought to establish some principles to guide archivists. Under the auspices of AHA’s Public Archives Commission (established in 1899), Leland, from his firsthand knowledge of European archival programs especially in France, set forth “Some Fundamental Principles” in 1912 for the benefit of state archival agencies. These principles included the concept that “archives are

⁴Burke, p. 44.

⁵A German term meaning the authorization of control of all incoming letters and of dispatch of all outgoing letters.

⁶Burke, p. 40.

⁷Waldo G. Leland, “Some Fundamental Principles in Relation to Archives,” *American Historical Association Annual Report for 1912* (1914): 264–68.

⁸Waldo G. Leland, “Some Early Recollections of an Itinerant Historian,” *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings* 61 (1951): 278.

⁹Burke, p. 42.

¹⁰In Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Iowa, Wyoming.

¹¹In Michigan, South Carolina (until 1954; became Archives Department), Pennsylvania (Historical and Museum Commission). See Ernst Posner, *American State Archives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964): *passim*.

¹²S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, trans. Arthur H. Leavitt (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1940). The *Manual* was translated and adapted into German in 1905, into Italian in 1908, and into French in 1910.

preserved primarily for public or administrative purposes, secondarily for private purposes, such as those of the historical investigator."¹³ Leland's pronouncement appeared a generation before the National Archives was founded. Simultaneously the Commission was sponsoring a "manual of archival economy,"¹⁴ but this was never completed. Soon after World War I the basic study in English was written by an Englishman, Hilary Jenkinson: *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London, 1922).¹⁵

As Jenkinson's *Manual* became the guide and arbiter for both British and American archivists, it also served gradually to establish or confirm archives as a profession distinct from history.¹⁶ By way of introduction he observed: "It is hardly necessary to say that History, as it is understood now, has become very largely dependent on archives," which he defined as records "drawn up or used in the course of administrative or executive transaction. . . subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors."¹⁷ This became the standard definition, often misunderstood by historians and even disregarded by some archivists, along with the postulate¹⁸ that "Archives were not drawn up in the interest of or for the information of Posterity." Archives have, therefore,

two common qualities of extraordinary importance: impartiality and authenticity. If the student understands their administrative context, "they cannot tell him anything but the truth,"¹⁹ i.e., the "archival truth" as distinguished from the "historical truth."

Having promulgated several archival principles and explained their application, Jenkinson maintained candidly and dogmatically that "the Archivist is not and ought not to be an Historian." He needs some knowledge of history, certainly in the period and subjects embraced by the records in his custody, but "his duty is to his Archives, independently of any of the Research subjects. . . which make use of Archives for their own ends. . . [He is] the servant of his Archives first and afterwards to the student Public."²⁰

"What, then, is there to theorize about?"—to repeat Burke's question. He seems to be seeking a universal "impulse" or "motivation" for the creation of records that transcends the need of mankind to meet present circumstances and current events by means of the records of the past, and to anticipate how those of the present-to-become-past may serve the future. The need or desire may be broadly social, or organization-oriented, or purely personal, but the resulting record is *after the fact* of motivation, and it is only at this point, or later, that the archivist's function comes into play. The records

¹³Leland, "Some Fundamental Principles in Relation to Archives," p. 266.

¹⁴Victor Hugo Paltsits, "Plan and Scope of a 'Manual of Archival Economy for the Use of American Archivists,'" *American Historical Association Annual Report for 1912* (1914): 253-63.

¹⁵Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd ed. rev. (London: Percy Lund, Humphries & Co., Ltd., 1966).

¹⁶This distinction was anticipated in the United States by Margaret C. Norton, trained in history, who was the first Archivist of the State of Illinois, 1922-57. See Thornton W. Mitchell, ed., *Norton on Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1975), pp. xv-xxi. The British Records Association was founded in 1932, the Society of American Archivists in 1936.

¹⁷Jenkinson, pp. 1-2.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 5-6.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

²⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 123-24.

administrator of a corporation, for example, may devise an improved system for management and appraisal of the corporation's records, but is it realistic to assert, after subsequent experience under this system, that it "was *destined* to happen that way?"²¹ The most notable contribution of Americans to the discipline of archives has been the concept and development of records administration (records management preferred by the "management") to prepare for intelligent retention and disposal of non-current records with respect to their value as archives. As this appraisal cannot be purely objective within the perimeters of human judgment, so retention will include certain records concerned with procedure as well as with policy.

Appraisal, however, does not involve "historical" *truth*. Burke's query "Should the archivist be concerned that what he is preserving is truth, or just evidence?" is irrelevant in the context of the origin and continuous custody of the archives. In this train of thought Burke continues: "Records must be respected and it is axiomatic that we should provide records that are respectable"²² (ambiguous advice, at best). This tenuous connection between truth and respectability has not only obscured the issues concerning archival theory, but also lured the author into theory of history, beyond the archivist's domain. He could have spared the reader the labored distinction between "pure data" (primary sources) and "historical facts" which, through the convoluted argument of Murray G. Murphey and the "theoretical models" of man and society

propounded by Robert Berkhofer, turn out to be a merging of fact and interpretation.²³

This dual procedure, involving the tangible documents and the intangible mental exercise of the historian throughout his research and crystallizing eventually in his written history, has been sensitively analyzed by Isaiah Berlin and epitomized thus: "History is what historians do." In simple terms, devoid of sociological jargon, "history is merely the projection into the past of this activity of selection and judgment, the search for coherence and unity, . . . to refine it with all the self-consciousness of which we are capable. . . all the knowledge and skills we have acquired. This, indeed, is why we speak of allowing for imponderables in forming historical judgment." Therefore Berlin maintains that "the gifts needed by the historian are those of association, . . . of perceiving the parts to wholes, of links that connect individuals viewed and savored as individuals and not as instances of types or laws. These gifts relate more directly to practice than to theory."²⁴

Burke, overlooking Jenkinson's dictum that "archives were not drawn up in the interest or for the information of Posterity," is distressed by the persistent dilemma—historical, in essence, not archival—revealed in his questions: "Can we really foresee what segment of today's records will be needed by researchers of the future" and, if we cannot, then what countermeasures do we take as archivists to reduce the impact of our interpretive actions?²⁵ If, as Berlin has succinctly put it, "history is what

²¹Burke, p. 42. The italics are mine.

²²Ibid., p. 43.

²³Murray G. Murphey, *Our Knowledge of the Historical Past* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), p. 102; Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis* (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 24-25.

²⁴Isaiah Berlin, "History and Theory," *History and Theory* 1 (1961): 23, 24, 30.

²⁵Burke, p. 43.

historians do," that is not what archivists do.

Trained in the discipline of history and experienced in the administration of historical manuscripts and governmental archives (a desirable cross-fertilization), Burke bespeaks the dominating influence of his training in questions he raises. These questions, however, pertain not to archival theory but to cultural issues derived from evaluation of the records, an act of historical interpretation. He asks whether "the urge to save, and to revere that which is saved, [is] a product of culture, learning, and sophistication." And "is the urge to preserve and to hold a document in high value a recent phenomenon, and if so, when and why did it begin?"²⁶ How authentic is the copy as "proof of contract" as distinguished from the original document recording a critical historical event and now on display as an artifact in a museum? "Is the medium the message?" If this trite epigram purports to convey some archival significance, one may ask: To whom is the message directed, and is it contingent on the nature of the medium? These questions and others Burke offers for the archivist to ponder while preparing for the mounting invasion of the "information specialist" of little learning and the sociologist pursuing his studies draped in horrendous terminology.²⁷ They are questions which blur the distinction between historical and archival theory.

Nevertheless, the kinship of the archivist and the historian, not so firmly and subconsciously felt as it once was, needs strengthening for the benefit of both disciplines. This commendable objective, stated in Burke's essay, though obscured by its title, merits contempla-

tion and intelligent procedure. Forty years ago Archivist of the United States Solon J. Buck classified the discipline of archives as "an applied science rather than a pure science, . . . compounded of parts of many other sciences or fields of knowledge, together with certain principles and techniques derived from practical experience."²⁸ Lord Green, the Right Honourable Master of the Rolls, in his foreword to *Archives*, the journal of the British Records Association, pointed out in 1949 that "the subject of Archives has in recent years become a matter of study in its own right. It is recognized as a liberal science. . . not merely because of its technical importance to archivists themselves or to those engaged in the study of history or sociology."²⁹ As a "liberal science" it expresses kinship with the humanities and the social sciences and, in certain contexts, with the natural sciences; as an "applied science," however, the theories pertain rather to the disciplines to which they may be related.

The distinction Burke draws between archival training and archival education is well taken, along with his criticism that "students are taught what and how, but not why" in temporary institutes and brief workshops under a variety of auspices to provide qualification, superficial at best, for an archival position. He advocates integration of the discipline of archives into college and university curricula, associated with the department of history. This would constitute archival *education*, "involving some broader principles than the mere study of processes; . . . looking for rationales, for basic concepts, for means of fitting the archivist into the warp and woof of society, for the *theory* behind

²⁶Ibid., pp. 43-44.

²⁷Ibid., p. 44.

²⁸Solon J. Buck, "The Training of American Archivists," *American Archivist* 4 (1941): 85.

²⁹British Records Association, *Archives* 1 (1949): 1.

the practice.” In this academic milieu Burke predicts that the archivists will “meld their concepts into a new philosophy of archives as records of human experience” and ultimately “produce a body of basic principles, a system of immutable laws, a litany of theory and dogma”—all productive of hypotheses and counter-hypotheses and a body of literature encapsulating the whole.³⁰

These are bold, extravagant thoughts on the “archival edge,”³¹ so to speak,

projecting great expectations for an alliance of archives with history. In such an alliance, however, let us not compromise the status of archives as a separate discipline, maintaining the *integrity* of the records as its first principle. Upon this “truth” hinges the collateral “truth” that the historian pursues within the documents, coincidentally with his interpretation. Thus perhaps the philosophy of history and the philosophy of archives may be mutually enlightened.

³⁰Burke, p. 45.

³¹See F. Gerald Ham, “The Archival Edge,” *American Archivist* 38 (1975): 5–13.