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About the cover: Tragedies such as assassinations of public figures often carry intense, equivocal meaning, and efforts to sanctify the sites of such tragedies with shrines or memorials often meet considerable resistance. The cover photograph shows the modest memorial to Martin Luther King, Jr., created on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, where the civil rights leader was assassinated in 1968. In his article, "To Remember and Forget," geographer Kenneth E. Foote explores the social pressures that shape society's view of the past as represented in cultural landscapes, archives, and other communicational resources. (Photo by Kenneth E. Foote)

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Forum

Correction: We regret the inadvertent misspelling of the name of one of the authors in the Winter 1990 issue. "The Role of the Technical Service of the Direction des Archives in the Construction of Archival Buildings in France" was written by Daniele Neirinck.

Comment on the Archival Profession

Clarke A. Elliott

Do other archivists sense that the profession is in a protracted and painful transitional stage, or is this only my personal midlife, midcareer crisis? It seems too early for me, in spite of the approaching hurdle of a fiftieth birthday, to become nostalgic for earlier times—and, presumably, too early for the profession as well. This is especially true when I realize that I am not looking back more than fifteen or twenty years. What I sense above all else, however, is that we are moving out of a cherished historical alliance with scholarship and into the camp of technology and a management function.

Two historical processes appear to be happening in our midst and with our concurrence, and yet I for one am fearful of their consequences. On the one hand, we have encircled in defense against the historical profession (among others), to argue that the special knowledge needed by an archivist is something that is separate from and beyond the range of ordinary academic training. At the same time, the idea that this lore need not now be learned, even within the structures of graduate professional education, has led to an academy of certified archivists that has the appearance of a secret order.

The other strand of history in which we are involved attaches itself to the data web that promises to bind and maintain social and political structures in the future. What seems to have happened in this process of integration, however, is an increasing abstraction of our archival work. There is a moving away, more and more, from the material and from the events themselves toward immersion in something loosely called information that, for the archivist, so easily can be transformed into disembodied symbols without situational mooring.

Have we forgotten that there is something special about the archival profession? Our traditional and distinctive charge is to tend the record of historical happenings, and with that goes a concern for the administrative structures, the courses of individual lives, and the unfolding of events to which the record is tied. The ultimate intent of this activity is the promotion of retrospective historical study. For what purpose do we wish to make ourselves an element of a national database if not to serve such scholarship? That fact sometimes seems to be lost, however, in an effort not to be overlooked by the management and information systems builders. The dangers in such an alliance, however, are a diversion of the profession from its central mission in history, and the loss of the distinctiveness of the materials in our charge as they

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enter a process of democratization, where all documents are equal because they are disconnected from the contexts of their creation.

It is one of our fundamental operating assumptions that a grounding in the historical situation is what gives meaning to the archival record. That meaning, however, is often not self-evident; it requires interpretation. In an institutional archive we, of course, have special relations to the originators of the record, and that canopy of obligation can be extended to include clients and others with claims to entitlement or similar documentary needs. Beyond these types of situations, in a society overloaded with published data (however broadly or narrowly defined), do we really believe that the archival record or manuscript collection has a crucial role to play before the material has been screened and evaluated and reformulated by a trained historiographic consciousness? This question must be seriously considered if we are to achieve philosophical clarity and ongoing integrity for the profession.

I have felt uneasy for some time about

what is happening in the profession, although even now I find myself grappling with the limits of analytical insight. I was struck recently, however, by the painful realization that a battle indeed is underway for the soul of the profession. As suggested, it is a battle of fundamentals. On the one hand, we can look deeply within ourselves, ask what our very special purpose is in society, reassert our traditional ties to scholarship, and choose historical understanding as our goal. On the other hand, we can chart the currents around us, look to sources of funding, unshackle ourselves from the discipline of history, and seek the way of power through the networks of information access. We, of course, need both as goals for the profession as we need similar goals of insight and influence for our individual lives, but the question of emphasis needs to be answered. As we plan for the profession at century's end, are we to recruit for the councils of power or are we to lead toward attainment of understanding? For myself, I cannot doubt that the latter is the higher, but more difficult because undervalued, goal.