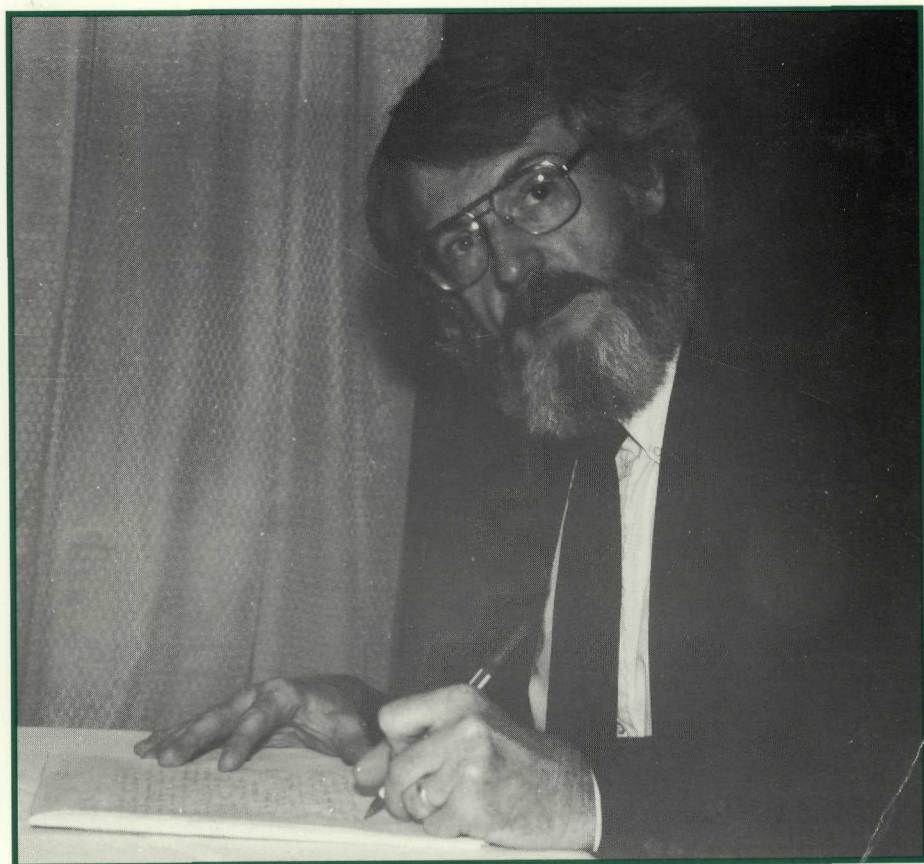


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About the cover: John Fleckner's 1990 Society of American Archivists presidential address, written in the form of a series of letters to a young person considering a career in archives, eloquently articulates the satisfactions that many archivists have found in their profession.

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Forum

Roberts on Archival Theory: Insightful or Fluff?

I hope that this letter will be only one of many received in praise of John Roberts's "Archival Theory: Myth or Banality?" [Winter 1990]. It is probably the only article in AA that I've ever read from start to finish; certainly it's the only one I've reread several times and in which I've underlined numerous passages. For a long time I've shared his opinion that much of archival theorizing is unnecessary. Roberts is quite right to add that it is also counter-productive, making us look foolish and self-deluded to nonarchivists instead of impressing them as it is apparently supposed to do.

The only weakness in the article is in its last paragraph. The allusion to "nattering schoolmarms" seems unnecessarily sexist, especially as the dancing-angels-on-pin-heads metaphor derives from an image of the inconsequential debates of medieval (male) philosophers. Otherwise, Roberts is to be commended for providing an insightful and much-needed point of view. I hope that his arguments will help bring at least some archival theorists back to a more balanced and realistic outlook on their work.

LAURA K. O'KEEFE
New York Public Library

"Banality of Archival Theory" by Mr. Roberts [Winter 1990] was generally good fun. By and large I agree with his attack on archival theory: there isn't any and probably there never will be. But he goes too far in reducing information professionals to mere Practitioners of Petty Procedures. While there may not be theory worthy

of analogy to the natural sciences, there certainly are generalizations built on practice that are very useful to the improvement of practice. Provenance is one such example which still fuels useful reflection on what archivists do.

Maybe archival generalizations are like generalizations about how to interpret history. Take the idea of Whig history. While it is manifestly impossible for historians to transcend all those forces of one's own culture and time which limit their interpretative power, it is very possible to avoid many really gross generalizations by awareness of one's context-bound limitations.

Well, anyhow. I was offended to be quoted as someone who advances those ridiculous notions of archival theory. In my article quoted by Mr. Roberts, I thought I was clarifying what is essentially a cost-benefit problem (invest in access tools versus invest in searching effort). I *am* still serious about the possibilities of developing the Provenance Method in modern retrieval systems, and about a year ago I actually discovered a large organization that is trying it!

But I was surprised by evidence of Mr. Roberts' incredible naivete when he said: "off the shelf software packages give any archivist the ability to produce a workable, if imperfect content-indexing scheme that is compatible with provenance arrangement." What a statement! Off-the-shelf software is likely to be a trap for any archivist who thinks it solves the problems or significantly addresses the costs of content indexing.

Mr. Roberts could benefit from contemplation of useful archival generalizations. And he could stop writing fluff pieces at-

tacking archival theory so that others can stop writing fluff Letters to the Editor.

RICHARD H. LYTLE

*Drexel University College of Information
Studies*

Author's response:

I am pleased that Mr. Lytle agrees with most of my article, but I stand by my comment about off-the-shelf software.

Obviously, automated access and control applications in archives can be highly elaborate and specific. The National Archives, for example, continues to plug away on an artificial intelligence system, and NARA's unique Archival Information System will perform many sophisticated functions. Various means of converting text into machine-readable form, meanwhile, may revolutionize archival reference. I concede the likelihood of technical advances in archival automation well beyond the capabilities of commercially-available packages (although the usefulness of such applications is a separate issue). Also, I am aware that agency-wide automation systems for large repositories might have to be custom-designed, if only to avoid multiple systems that are either redundant or incompatible.

Nonetheless, my statement that off-the-shelf software can be used easily and effectively to provide subject access to records with provenance arrangement is absolutely true. All the necessary data elements can be included—hierarchy information, keywords, arrangement, stack location, restrictions, and agency histories. Commercial vendors at a recent MARAC conference, in fact, displayed a number of systems that can be readily adapted to archival use. Developing finding aids using dBase IV or Tracker or whatever may not be archives nirvana, but it is within reach of any archivist and it can get the job done. It is perfectly practical and I am sure that it is being done all the time in repositories all over the country.

As far as Provenance Method is concerned, I have never been convinced that Mr. Lytle's research, involving fifteen questions asked of a handful of staff members at a highly specialized archives, provides much support for his far-reaching argument. It is true that useful generalizations must inform our work, but can such generalizations be used on a statistical survey of the work habits and general competence for fewer than ten archivists at the Baltimore Region Institutional Studies Center?

I am grateful to Ms. O'Keefe for her letter, and I apologize for an unfortunate choice of words in alluding to "nattering schoolmarms." My intention had been to convey an impression of people who are unduly strict or fussy—character traits that can be identified in men and women alike.

JOHN W. ROBERTS

Federal Bureau of Prisons

Sources on Sound Recordings

The publication of Christopher Ann Paton's article, "Whispers in the Stacks: The Problem of Sound Recordings in Archives," (Spring 1990) raises questions on editorial oversight. Paton is guilty of some rather egregious and misleading oversights in her attempt to synthesize the writings on sound recordings. One can probably excuse the absence of relevant cognate volumes from the computer field: for example, Ford Kalil's *Magnetic Tape Recording in the Eighties* and Sidney Geller's *The Care and Handling of Computer Magnetic Storage Materials*. But what about the additional cross-disciplinary sources cited in Mary Bowling's review essay seventy pages later in the same issue? There are also unnamed but vital contacts and contributions from the recorded tape industry and closer to home from the Oral History Association, the Folklore Archivists Network, and the International Association of Sound Archives—the last of which has issued several

significant books on the general topic of sound archives. The Canadian archivists have also contributed a very solid work in both French and English and a new volume appeared in 1990 from England. More specifically, any modern study on the conservation of magnetic recording material must include such studies as the *Prediction of the Long Term Stability of Polyester-Based Recording Media* by the National Bureau of Standards for the National Archives plus the various national and international standards that Vicky Walch started to enumerate in her essay in the same volume. Finally, a bruised ego notes my own *Management of Oral History Sound Archives*, which is carried by the SAA for purchase and won the SAA's Leland Award in 1987 for excellence in archival literature. Paton has some good ideas and is to be encouraged for initiative, but someone should have demanded more research.

FREDERICK J. STIELOW
Catholic University of America

Editors' response:

Frederick Stielow's assertion that the editors should have required more comprehensive citation of writings on sound recordings assumes a purpose more ambitious than that stated by the author. After establishing that archivists have not dealt adequately with the issues of sound recordings in their own core literature, Christopher Ann Paton pointed to examples of the relevant literature produced by other disciplines, but she did not "attempt to synthesize the writings on sound recordings," nor did we expect and encourage her to do so.

The criticism provides the opportunity to clarify a distinction between the departments in the *American Archivist*. The various departments have emerged to emphasize the importance of diversity in *how*, as well as *what*, subjects are explored and investigated. Research articles carry the greatest

expectation—enforced by peer-review scrutiny—for systematic and comprehensive inquiry. If all submissions were held to such standards, we would be publishing very slim volumes; more importantly, the archival literature would lose much valuable reporting and analysis. (Now you know approximately where we stand on the theory/useful reflection/fluff discussion in the Lytle-Roberts discussion above.) We also publish occasional literature reviews, such as the one by Terry Abraham that appears in this issue. Paton wrote neither a research article nor a literature review, although she might have. (In fact, she had prepared a selective bibliography on preservation of sound archives that we chose not to include for reasons that had to do with departmental priorities and available space. That bibliography will be published in the Spring 1991 issue of the *Midwestern Archivist*.)

The Perspectives department offers an alternate venue for more exploratory commentaries and thinkpieces, such as Paton's. We expect our Perspectives authors to demonstrate that they have been informed by relevant literature and information sources, but the focus is more on working through an issue and calling attention to a problem than on exhaustive research. Similarly, we expect Case Studies authors, where the emphasis is on reporting and analyzing a specific project or activity, to show an awareness of related activities and writings, but not to engage in extensive bibliographic discussion.

To the editor:

Admiration and thanks are due to editor David Klaassen, for publishing, and to Clark A. Elliott, for writing the deeply perceptive "Comment on the Archival Profession," (Forum, Summer 1990). We have need to be reminded that there is something special about the archival profession. As I see it, it is the function of the archivist to acquire and preserve the materials the archivist will

transmit to posterity and thus fulfill the historic and vibrant function of linking the past to the present.

Clark Elliott's view of the archival profession as having its central mission in history, in ties to traditional scholarship, in

service to clients with documentary needs, and in attainment of understanding, can lead only to high goals.

ANTOINETTE CIOLLI
Brooklyn College (retired)