

## International Scene

MARJORIE BARRITT AND NANCY BARTLETT, editors

# On the Identity of the American Archival Profession: A European Perspective

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**Abstract:** The author, a Dutch archivist, reflects on the imprecision of the archival profession as practiced in the United States. The emphasis in the United States seems to be on "collecting." This impression, which he gathered from attendance at SAA annual meetings and from his reading of American archival literature, is contrary to his understanding of the profession. He summarizes the development of the profession in Europe, especially the Netherlands, and comments on the willingness of archivists in the United States to borrow library procedures.

*About the author:* Joan van Albada is municipal archivist in Dordrecht, a post he formerly filled in 's-Hertogenbosch and Tilburg. He has a master's degree in history from the University of Groningen and is a graduate of the Dutch National Archives School. Van Albada has been active in national and international professional organizations. He is currently editor of *Janus*, the bulletin published by the International Council on Archives. He was also conference codirector of the October 1991 Maastricht symposium, "Europe and Archives without Boundaries."

AS A COLLEAGUE FROM across the Atlantic, I have attended, filled with both admiration and astonishment, three Society of American Archivists annual meetings: Austin in 1985, Chicago in 1986, and Seattle in 1990. I was filled with admiration because of the number of sessions and subjects and because of the eagerness of the participants to augment their knowledge. I was filled with admiration for the numerous speakers, who presented their papers convincingly and were prepared for comments or questions. I was filled with admiration for the energy and creativity of the colleagues of the organizational committees, who on an annual basis organize congresses the size of the quadrennial congresses of the International Council on Archives.

I was filled with astonishment because as I attended the sessions I lost sight of the core of the profession of "archivist," and I wondered if all this knowledge could and would be digested by the participants. The number of subjects is incredible, but do they—and, if yes, how do they—relate to the humble profession of the archivist, at least to the profession as I have known it in the Netherlands. This question remains in spite of my additional readings in the *American Archivist*, the *SAA Newsletter*, and other American archival publications.

I was filled with astonishment because I was more and more convinced that the SAA annual meetings dealt only partially with my profession, namely the profession of archivist. Most sessions, apart from those related to topics like conservation and user services, dealt with collecting and documenting and not with the core of the profession: archives management, the accessioning, selection and appraisal, and processing of record groups. The sessions did not deal with the essence of archives as defined by Muller, Feith, and Fruin in 1898 or as defined in the 1984 ICA dictionary. According to Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *archives* are

the whole of the written documents,

drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, in so far as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or of that official.<sup>1</sup>

According to the ICA dictionary, *archives* are

(1) Non-current records preserved, with or without selection, by those responsible for their creation or by their successors in function for their own use or by an appropriate *archives* (2) because of their *archival value*.

(2) An institution responsible for the *acquisition, preservation and communication of archives* . . . .

(3) A building or part of a building in which *archives* (1) are preserved and made available for consultation: also called archive(s) repository; archival depository (US).<sup>2</sup>

My preference is for the simple and lucid definition of 1898. However, the 1984 definition is clear: archives are successively *created, received, maintained, and preserved*; archives are not *collected*, never ever. For years collecting has been a fashion; that in itself is not surprising. However, if collectors start calling themselves archivists and real archivists put up with that, I consider that to be more than surprising.

It is not just my astonishment that urges me to convey my ideas; it is above all my gratitude for all the new ideas acquired, for the friendship received, and because of my sympathy with daring undertakings like the

<sup>1</sup>S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Handleiding voor het Ordenen en Beschrijven van Archieven* (Groningen: Erven B. Van derKamp, 2d ed., 1920). Translation of the second Dutch edition by Arthur H. Leavitt published as *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1940; 2d ed., 1968): 13.

<sup>2</sup>International Council on Archives, *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, ICA Handbook Series, Vol. 3, (Munich: K. G. Saur, 1984): 25.

report *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities*, that has induced me to put these ideas into writing as my contribution to a discussion on the identity or the mission of the professional archivist which has not fully taken place.<sup>3</sup> For only when archival identity and mission are clear can the nonarchival world, be it as donor or sponsor of a project, form a picture of what can be expected from an archives service and from archivists.

Perhaps a few words on the history of the profession in Europe will clarify the background of my position.<sup>4</sup> In most European countries the beginnings of a serious interest in history date back to the nineteenth century. Heavily influenced by romanticism, a new kind of historian introduced other ways of studying the history of one's own town, province, country, or tribe. In preceding centuries archives had been closed except to those hired to glorify the local prince or gentry, or to members of the ruling class. From the nineteenth century onwards, thanks primarily to the 1789 French revolution, the value of archives as a means for controlling government was recognized.

In certain countries archival science—the inclusive rules, the do's and don'ts of archives management—was introduced. Archival science in all these countries had in common the principles of provenance and respect for original order. Archivists promoted the concepts that archival documents should be kept and studied in their original context, that content and context are integral to the scientific and legal value of an archival document, that no archives is

without an original order, and that that order should form the backbone of any cataloging activity. Only in an exceptional case, when the original order can not be reconstructed, is the archivist entitled to create his own convenient order, within the limits of sound professional practice.

Initially archivists held only those archives considered historically valuable, e.g., from before the French revolution. In the twentieth century archivists concluded that they should extend their task to include modern records of government administrations.

Now that archivists have discovered that most government offices care for active records badly, they have begun to be interested in the creation of records and to act as advisors on the organization and maintenance of documentary systems. The archivist has begun to act as a consultant in records management on behalf of both his administration and his own interest. The better his consultation, the better his accruals, and the less time that will be wasted on appraising bulk records that have been moved from attic to cellar and from cellar to attic.

Although the cultural importance of archives is of great value, most archivists, certainly Dutch archivists, derive the existence of their archives positions from the juridical and administrative responsibilities of the archives service. This is the case even though, as we all know, the use of archives from the historical/cultural point of view exceeds by far the juridical/administrative use. Nonetheless, in our daily lives we experience a harmony between the two roles of the archivist, that of being the guardians of juridical/administrative interests and of historical/cultural interests at the same time.

I offer this short sketch to explain the archivist's position as part of a continuum, somewhere on a line in the continuous management system of information within the particular administrative unit for which

<sup>3</sup>*Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986).

<sup>4</sup>For instance, see Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution," in Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds., *A Modern Archives Reader* (Washington, National Archives and Records Service 1984): 3-14.

he works. The archivist is a cog in the wheel in that administrative system despite his efforts to hold himself aloof and independent, yet obedient, to the system and in spite of his efforts to play the role of the scrupulous and incorruptible servant of the unique research that can only be carried out in the archives under his care. This scrupulousness in aiding research may result in his taking into custody records and other documents from parties other than his own administrative unit, not on behalf of collecting in itself, but in order to insure the possibility of comprehensive research of the history of his own administrative unit. This may occur irrespective of whether the archivist is in public or private service. Even so the archivist remains an archivist. This form of collecting does not turn an archivist into a librarian, a manuscript curator, or worse.

The essence of the principles introduced into the Dutch archival scene in the late nineteenth century is well known, at least if we believe Schellenberg's words when he stated that the manual of Muller, Feith, and Fruin "became a Bible for modern archivists."<sup>5</sup> Though the manual is currently considered only a part of this Bible (even in the Netherlands, which according to the nineteenth-century German poet Heinrich Heine is always fifty years behind, the profession is on the move), one may say that the average Dutch archivist pays more deference to the manual than to the Scriptures.

The manual was a reaction to the out-of-context chronological lists of documents prepared by many of Muller, Feith, and Fruin's mid-nineteenth-century colleagues. These lists were akin to library systems of their day and paid no account to the original order of the documents. One may say

that as the Bible serves to distinguish Christians from other believers, the manual makes the distinction between archivists and librarians, documentalists, and other records-related professions.

An archives is established implicitly in the charter of an organization. Libraries and collections only come into existence on the basis of an explicit resolution of an organization. Archives "are," no matter if they are managed by a secretary, a filing clerk, a records manager, or an archivist. Librarians and documentalists are by definition discriminatory in the pursuance of their collecting. In theory the archivist automatically has custody over all records received or created by the organization for which he works. The archivist is therefore passive, active, and discriminatory all at the same time, as he is responsible for appraisal and selection of the records of his organization, sometimes destroying over 90 percent of the records created.

Another distinction between archives and data collections held in libraries lies in the very nature of research. Research in archives is, or should be, conducted in context. An example: a letter from A to B may be kept in the archives of A, B, or N. The location determines the interpretation of the contents and the significance of the letter. If the letter is still in the archives of A, did B receive it? Are there any registry marks to prove the reception by B? If the letter is in the archives of B, was it truly sent by A? If the letter is in the archives of N, has it ever been in the possession of B, and was it really written by A? It is up to the researcher to come to conclusions based on content and location. It is up to the archivist to certify the provenance of the record in accordance with *respect des fonds*. By doing this the archivist enables the researcher to pursue his task and to prove his hypothesis.

Why this perhaps superfluous example? Some years ago the SAA *Newsletter* carried this advertisement:

<sup>5</sup>T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives, Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956): 175.

**Wanted:** The City of Los Angeles is in the process of seeking a repository for its police department files relating to the assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy. The files, comprising approximately 35 cubic feet, consist of about 50,000 pages, over 2,000 photographs, about 200 tape recordings, over 100 pieces of evidence and several films, video, and audio tapes. Repositories must be financially capable of redacting and processing the files, expected to cost about \$100,000 over a two-year period. Representatives of interested repositories should contact Ms. Diana S. Nixon, Director, National Archives - Los Angeles Branch, P.O. Box 6719, Laguna Niguel, CA 92677.<sup>6</sup>

Beside the fact that in the Netherlands such an advertisement would have meant a violation of the legislation, no sound Dutch archivist would be capable of even drafting such an advertisement, unless in a state of extreme mental perversity. Also, the Netherlands' Association of Archivists would never ever publish such an advertisement in its newsletter, not even for a double or triple rate. (We are Dutch, but there are limits). A librarian, a documentalist, or some other Dutch collecting species wouldn't have minded such a text. However, even amongst these people there are exceptions. To put it in a few words, such a text is a total denial of the profession, and of the ethics of the professional archivist.

This may be a hard judgement, but it grows out of a concern over the increasing influence of United States archivists on the profession. My opinion has not been softened by the SAA 1990 meeting in Seattle. The majority of the sessions were not archivist-oriented but collector-oriented,

whether the collectors were librarians, manuscript curators, or documentalists. Don't misunderstand me, I hold nothing against collectors, since even they may be honorable men, at least if they don't touch archives; and if they have to touch them, if they obey the rules for preparing finding aids to archives. They would be furious in their turn, and for good reasons, if archivists would catalog library holdings contrary to library rules.

This explains my vehemence during one of the SAA sessions in Seattle when I explained that in Europe the MARC Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) format is sometimes called the American disease, a point I felt I needed to make because of the fact that in the U.S. more and more often archives are arranged and described out of context, in conformity with a praxis more useful to libraries. Books have inherent informational value, single archival documents lose their informational value when described out of context. An archivist takes archives, not loose documents, into custody, even if these archives represent only 1 or 5 percent of the original mass. MARC AMC will stop being an American disease at the moment when any archivist, without special library training, is capable of inserting descriptions of any archival document or series at at least three related levels and when the field length is free, enabling him thereby to insert real archival descriptions.

I hope to attend future SAA meetings as a foreign associate member, certified or not, and to learn more about my profession and related professions. That is why I feel free to say: colleagues, see the errors of your ways. Otherwise in another ten years my next article might be refused by the editor because of its then necessary title, "On the Rape of the American Archival Profession: a Foreign Perspective."

<sup>6</sup>SAA Newsletter, August 1986, 3.