

Perspective

Is There Room for Archives in the Postmodern World?

CAROLYN HEALD

Abstract: This extended think-piece begins by exploring the late twentieth-century philosophical trend of postmodernism, and what its fragmented, decontextualized world-view means for archives. Such a position, as taken up by some historians, posits the absence of coherence, the death of grand historical narratives, and the supremacy of relativity. Consideration of the postmodern serves as a jumping-off point for an exploration of the nature of records, and the mission of the archival profession to furnish an understanding of the documentary evidence of past societies. The discussion leads full circle to situating archivists within their own (postmodern) society and explores how current trends in appraisal and description reflect present societal concerns. Ultimately, the article concludes that there is room for archives and archivists in the postmodern world, and that archivists, with their unique perspective on reading/deconstructing the documentary traces of society, are ideally suited to make sense of it.

About the author: Carolyn Heald is Senior Archivist in the Health/Social Portfolio at the Archives of Ontario, Toronto. She holds an M.A. in History, and has recently completed a Master of Library Science Degree at the University of Toronto. This paper was originally written in April 1994 for a reading course in archival diplomatics.

We are awash in a sea of mega-choice as we lay down the jigsaw puzzle and take up the transformer. Finding a way through may be a matter of finding our way back, not to some happy simplicity of some idealized archival past, but to the nature of our humanity, who we are and what we are about, as we grapple with the extraordinary freedoms and constraints of automation and electronic communication in general.¹

I REMEMBER, WHEN FIRST reading this passage, being struck by the aptness of Hugh Taylor's metaphor of archives as Transformer, that popular toy which appears to be one thing—a car perhaps—but that, with a few quick manipulations can be turned into something else, such as a dragon. Electronic records, Taylor was pointing out, are like the Transformer, whereas records on paper or tape resemble the old-fashioned jigsaw puzzle with its one correct pattern. As usual, I was delighted by the flexibility and perceptiveness of Taylor's mind. Re-reading his article five years later, I could barely recollect what a Transformer was. Like the Rubik's Cube of the early 1980s, Transformers seem to have gone out of fashion. Just another passing fancy, a fad that had its day and now clutters up the closet, broken and forgotten. Such is the postmodern condition. A world of fads and fashions, fragmented, decontextualized, and global.

What does it mean to speak of the postmodern condition? A textbook describes it as

a cultural condition prevailing in the advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s, characterized by a superabundance of disconnected images and styles—most noticeably in television, advertising, commercial design, and pop video....said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.²

It has been called “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process,”³ rampant capitalism, excessive consumerism, and “a random cannibalization of all the styles of the past.”⁴ It is often related specifically to historical (un)consciousness, or “historical deafness”:⁵

It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.⁶

¹Hugh A. Taylor, “Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?” *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987–1988): 13.

²Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 174–75.

³Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), x.

⁴Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 145.

⁵Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xi.

⁶Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

It is heritage shopping malls, Madonna, the return of tie-dye without the ideology that first inspired it. Some have described it as the death of centers, or the de-centring of rational meta-narratives; the end of fixed, over-arching, grand theories; the death of the Enlightenment project; the death of certainty and truth. It is a world of relativism, composed of a pastiche of fragments with no apparent relevance to the past, present, or future.

Archives and the Historical Imagination

Modern archives, and libraries even more so, were built on a solid foundation of nineteenth-century rational positivism. American librarian Melvil Dewey, with his Dewey Decimal Classification scheme, was perhaps the positivist extraordinaire. Devising his system in the early 1870s based on the work of Francis Bacon, Dewey conceived of all knowledge as fitting neatly into a wonderfully logical hierarchical system of ten main classes based on subject disciplines. Each main class was further broken down into ten divisions, which were in turn further sub-divided into ten sections. It was an *a priori* approach to the classification of knowledge, a confident assertion that all that was known and ever knowable about the world would fit into his system. The DDC was widely adopted and is still in use world-wide. Museums, too, with their penchant for building taxonomic schemata and putting things under glass, were a product of the Enlightenment, and of scientific inquiry into the natural world. As for archives, while the first European repositories were created in the sixteenth century for distinctly administrative purposes, modern archives were an outgrowth of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, after which their historical function came to the fore. It was in the nineteenth century that grand classification schemes, often based on subject, were adopted, and masses of documents organized according to these systems. The Public Record Office in England was founded in 1838, and embarked on various classification schemes mingling provenance and chronology.⁷ Clearly the historical sensibility and its emphasis on order was a development of the nineteenth century, and it affected the cultural role of archives:

The appearance of historical scholarship based upon primary materials combined with public access to archives in the nineteenth century presented the archivist with a new and aggressive user and, potentially, a new social purpose for archives. The archivist was now the custodian not just of useful records but of historical records, the documentary heritage of the nation now defined as a socio-historical concept. The new perception of the character of archives carried with it the obvious contention that records had more than primary value. They now possessed a secondary value, a value for vital historical research purposes of various kinds.⁸

Since most of us would agree that archives continue to serve history or scholarly research about the past, it might be useful to look at how historians have responded to the postmodern condition. In the last few years, historiography has been brought into the

⁷Michel Duchein, "The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe," *American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992): 14-24; Michael Roper, "The Development of the Principles of Provenance and Respect for Original Order in the Public Record Office," in *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, edited by Barbara L. Craig (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 134-53.

⁸Roy C. Schaeffer, "Transcendent Concepts: Power, Appraisal, and the Archivist as 'Social Outcast,'" *American Archivist* 55 (Fall 1992): 611.

postmodern world mainly by scholars influenced by literary theory, and, in particular, by the works of the French philosophers, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. There is no need to chronicle in detail the shift in historiographical thinking from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Historiography mirrored the development of archives and mutually reinforced the positivist tendencies, as the subjective narratives of Macaulay and Carlyle gave way to objective, empirical histories of von Ranke, based on the scouring of archives and the careful documentation of each and every fact. Those of us with an academic history background likely learned in this tradition: we were all required to read E.H. Carr's *What is History?* and model ourselves not on Dickens' Mr. Gradgrind with his facts, facts, facts, but on a modified version, where *facts* (as garnered in archives) and *interpretation* resided together:

The historian is neither the humble slave nor the tyrannical master of his facts. The relation between the historian and his facts is one of equality, of give-and-take. As any working historian knows, if he stops to reflect what he is doing as he thinks and writes, the historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. It is impossible to assign primacy to one over the other.⁹

That was then. Now, Carr has been replaced by a new historiographical primer, Keith Jenkins' *Re-thinking History*, a tiny book that begins innocuously enough, but ends up, by the third and final chapter, didactically and unabashedly revealing its anti-establishment, postmodern bias. Jenkins builds on Carr's ideas, and swings the pendulum completely to the left. Where Carr saw no need to define history as a concept, Jenkins views history as merely "one of a series of discourses about the world."¹⁰ Where Carr's historian was required to navigate a steady course through the Scylla of objective facts and the Charybdis of subjective interpretation, Jenkins' historian must construct a good story. History, according to Jenkins, is "a worldly, wordy language game played for real, and where the metaphors of history as science or history as art reflect the distribution of power that put these metaphors into play."¹¹ This is history as fiction; reading what you want to read, writing what you want to write. Here Jenkins is drawing on the work of intellectual historians such as Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra who have criticized historical writing for getting stuck in the nineteenth century and ignoring philosophical developments of the twentieth. White and LaCapra have focused on the role of language and narrative structures, and see the historical imagination as another mode of writing—one that has its own rules and perspectives emphasizing reality and facts, and whose primary vice is that it excels at "finding the simple in the complex and the familiar in the strange."¹² In other words, the historical imagination persists in following those nineteenth-century principles of order and coherence when current philosophical trends are towards complexity, fragmentation, and incoherence.

⁹E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 29.

¹⁰Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 5.

¹¹Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 56.

¹²Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), as quoted in Lloyd S. Kramer, "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra," in *The New Cultural History*, edited by Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 100.

But if historical writing is fiction, then why do it at all? Why even bother to look at the traces (Jenkins rejects the term "evidence") of the past that archives so diligently collect, organize, and describe? Doesn't the postmodern approach herald the death of archives, and relegate all our traces to the dustbin? If all history is fiction, or at least subjective, where does that leave archivists with our manuscript mountains, our piles of files, all purporting to document reality? Will they ever be used for the writing of history? Does it really matter if they are or aren't? Why do archives exist anyway? To serve history? To serve society's collective memory? Do archives have a cultural purpose? On top of this existential soul-searching, archivists are facing a problem of entropy: information overload, and the tendency for information to implode and cause disinformation. Surely, this is a symptom of the postmodern condition, of the "information age." But how can we cope? How can we avoid being overcome by the sheer volume of information and sinking at the same time into the philosophical quagmire of postmodern thinking that everything is relative, nothing is stable? Is there a role for archives in the postmodern world?

I would argue that there is a role for archives, and that our claim to a legitimate role in society rests neither on (a) serving historiographical fads, nor on (b) claiming to be information specialists. Rather our claim to participate in the postmodern world rests with an understanding of the form and function of documentary records. This is nothing less than—dare I say it—diplomats, in the fullest sense of the term.

Reading Archives

Some archivists, notably Brien Brothman and Richard Brown, both of the National Archives of Canada, have tried to fit archives within postmodern literary/philosophical theories, particularly adopting Derrida's technique of deconstruction. In literary theory, deconstruction means "a philosophically sceptical approach to the possibility of coherent meaning in language....Deconstructive readings track down within a text the aporia or internal contradiction that undermines its claims to coherent meaning."¹³ In other words, it refuses to rely merely on the words for meaning; context is as important as content. As Brothman puts it, deconstruction's strategy is "to disturb without toppling; to grasp where and how discourses and concepts live by putting them under the threat of decomposition."¹⁴ In two seminal articles, Brothman takes aim at the archival profession, lifting the veil on the age-old, revered concepts of provenance and original order, and indeed threatening to undermine the solid, objective foundation upon which we believe our archival institutions to be built.¹⁵ Richard Brown, on the other hand, specifically addresses the appraisal function, and in a more narrowly-focused article, advocates the deconstructive technique for our archival assessments of records, or, in the language of discourse theorists, texts. Brown's purpose is a practical one: he seeks to find a method for systematically appraising the massive amount of federal government records created every year, and, in the end, advocates a structural-functional model that "reads" and assesses the bureaucratic

¹³Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 51–52.

¹⁴Brien Brothman, "The Limits of Limits: Derridean Deconstruction and the Archival Institution," *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993): 207.

¹⁵See also Brothman's "Orders of Values: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 78–100.

discourse.¹⁶ Not only do the structures of creating agencies offer lenses through which to appraise the records, but “so do discursive formations, or homogeneities of texts (or records), through their vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric and physical organization, articulate and transcribe the construction, transformations, mutations, and functions-processes of systems.”¹⁷ This is more than content; this is “records as narrative sources of context.”¹⁸ Ultimately, Brown seeks “to identify the records environment in which social meaning is composed and produced” and suggests that “By learning to read (or re-read) records as sources of discourse (context) rather than as sources of value (information), archivists may profitably expand their ‘knowledgeability’ about bureaucratic agency and structure.”¹⁹ Brown’s insights are all well and good, but isn’t this what good archivists have always done, just perhaps without the philosophical jargon? Haven’t good archivists always read/deconstructed records/texts as much for their context/discourse as for their content/information? How do we *read* texts? How do we deconstruct them to derive meaning from them? Good archivists have always studied not just what is said, but how the message is expressed: the language, the medium, the technology of production, the genre of the document, the historical circumstances and the context of writing (who the author is, who the intended audience is). Whether our readings achieve the “right answer” is irrelevant in the world of Transformers; it is the process that is important.

There are many ways and reasons why we read texts. At the most basic (and this must be stated explicitly in these slippery postmodern times), we read to understand what has been written; we read to interpret the words that represent the ideas generated from an individual’s mind. Even the post-structuralists who posit language as determinative and divorced from meaning must assume this, or else why bother writing at all?²⁰ In other words, we read to achieve meaning through lexicographical symbols. On this level, we read texts to garner some information and insights into “the past,” and to uncover the historical context: what happened when and who did it. North American archivists on the whole tend to be very comfortable with this type of reading since most of us have come to the profession with some training in history. Hugh Taylor, whose British origin is not insignificant, has shown us how to read documents from the perspective of communications theory, drawing on McLuhan’s insights about the nature of media. What does it matter that a document is transmitted on stone or parchment, or paper or in electronic signals? How do oral societies differ from societies inured with print? And what does the electronic revolution mean for our own society? Communications also has to do with mechanical issues such as language/language usage, handwriting, and type. Perhaps because of our comparatively short history, North American archivists have not had to deal with the

¹⁶Discourse is defined as “any coherent body of statements that produces a self-confirming account of reality by defining an object of attention and generating concepts with which to analyse it (e.g. medical discourse, legal discourse, aesthetic discourse).” Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 59.

¹⁷Richard Brown, “Records Acquisition Strategy and Its Theoretical Foundation: The Case for a Concept of Archival Hermeneutics,” *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–92): 43.

¹⁸Brown, “Records Acquisition Strategy,” 50.

¹⁹Brown, “Records Acquisition Strategy,” 43, 52.

²⁰It must be pointed out that not all historians are of one mind over the postmodernist debate. Bryan Palmer has criticized the tendency to reduce historical reality to language in his *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). Similarly, Gertrude Himmelfarb has criticized postmodernism as just another passing fad, anticipating a time when “boredom, careerism...and sheer bloody-mindedness” will impel a new generation of historians to post-post-modernism. See her article, “Telling it as you like it: Post-modernist History and the Flight from Fact,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 October 1992.

problems encountered in the United Kingdom where a knowledge of medieval Latin and paleography may be a requirement for the job. Consequently, our appreciation of such skills may never have been awakened. However, understanding the nature of handwriting may tell us quite a lot about the documents we are appraising and describing. Not only does it help us to track the authenticity of documents, but it can also help to date them. These are the skills used by British archivists and historians in deciphering medieval manuscripts, but they have relevance for our own situation. Even a knowledge of type styles can be useful, as historical bibliographers know.

One example of deconstruction (and there are many in the archival literature), is Bill Russell's reading of the records-keeping practices of the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs. Russell traces the development of the central registry and local agency records-keeping practices and their relationship to those of the federal government. He also studies the records-keeping function from the perspective of the department's officials, thereby gaining an understanding of self-perceived mandate. He concludes that the bureaucrats saw their role as something like a crusader: "The Indian was the untutored ward of the state; the DIA bore a responsibility to protect, through cautious records-keeping practices, not just the interests of the department but also those interests—albeit as defined by ethnocentric white bureaucrats—of the Indian people who were viewed essentially as legal minors. Here was the 'White Man's Burden' carried into the realm of the records office."²¹ Here was the moral function of documentation.

Diplomatics is also a method for reading documentary texts. Luciana Duranti, the chief proponent of diplomatic criticism in North America, has sometimes been attacked for proposing a cumbersome, document-specific analytic methodology, more appropriate to the relatively small universe of medieval manuscripts than to the mega-collections of twentieth-century bureaucracies. The Italian expatriate has been questioned for thrusting a corpus of European esoterica on unsuspecting North American archivists, making us parse each and every document like a fifth grade grammar teacher.²² Yet a careful reading of her articles reveals a much broader purpose of diplomatic criticism, aimed not only at finding general documentary patterns in the particular, but also at discovering the social context of creation. Diplomatics, she says, "is the discipline which studies the genesis, forms, and transmission of archival documents, and their relationship with the facts represented in them and with their creator, in order to identify, evaluate, and communicate their true nature."²³ In other words, diplomatics implies all things about records themselves; it goes beyond mere content to look at the physical and the contextual elements.

Is Duranti's definition of diplomatics much different from Richard Brown's notion of archival hermeneutics which "contrives to peel away the subjective-informational value of documents to concentrate on the objective-evidential qualities implicit in the context of their creation; [and] endeavours to test the archival-historical value of records inherent in their production, composition, formation, and organization against the capacity of their information content to yield such value"?²⁴ Brown goes on to add the following:

²¹Bill Russell, "The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860–1914," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984–85): 72.

²²See Luciana Duranti's six seminal articles entitled "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," Parts I–VI, *Archivaria* 28–33 (Summer 1989 to Winter 1991–92 respectively).

²³Duranti, "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989): 17.

²⁴Brown, "Records Acquisition Strategy," 39–40.

the theory advocates a form of “deconstruction” by reducing the universe of government information to the sources of its primary signification, its administrative ethos or network of bureaucratic sub-components, so as to establish tiers of archival-historical value based on the appraisal of bureaucratic context(s) and records creators.²⁵

One could argue that *diplomats* is a form of deconstruction. And good archivists have been practicing deconstruction for a long time; it is just that it has been done unselfconsciously. No one has called it by its postmodern name. The difference between Duranti and Brown is one of perspective: Duranti takes a bottom-up approach by concentrating primarily on the record and the act it records, while Brown’s approach is top-down, concentrating primarily on the creator. But they nevertheless meet in the records-creating and records-keeping middle. Reading texts for their non-textual information is part of the unique archival perspective. Unfortunately, the emphasis on cultural artifacts has been gradually giving way to an emphasis on information—decontextualized, decentred, and destructive. It is important to remember that the record does not change; how we interpret it does. This perspective—the all-encompassing diplomatic perspective—can and should be marshalled today to understand not just the records our society creates, particularly automated records, but the context of creation and social meaning. What does the late-twentieth-century fetish for information reveal about our society? And what role do records (note that I said “records,” not “information”) play in determining our social relations?

The Cultural Role of Archives

One objective in reading texts is to understand ourselves as archivists and the role of archives in society. This is *diplomats* on the macro-level, or meta-archives. Consideration of the changing uses of records and documentation shows us that archives (records and institutions) are just as culturally-determined as everything else, and that our understanding of them changes as well. It also gives us a sense of our cultural purpose. In this information-overloaded, postmodern society, it is important to recognize that documents are needed more than ever, not because they have some objective and immutable status, but because our society has deemed them valuable; we are a document-oriented society. Documents are seen as the guarantee of rights and privileges in a democratic society. The recent training schools scandal in Ontario is a case in point. In 1990, several Catholic priests were charged with having physically and sexually abused wards in their charge at a training school for boys during the 1950s and 1960s. Over the next few years, similar incidents at other schools were brought to light, including allegations of sexual abuse of female wards by male guards at a school for girls. Special detective units of the provincial and local police flooded the provincial archives where some of the case files are housed. Several convictions have followed and others are pending, and financial compensation has been awarded to those who have proven, through their case files, that they were present at the schools during the dates in question. Institutions in other provinces have encountered similar investigations, such as the Mount Cashel orphanage in Newfoundland, and residential schools in Saskatchewan. Indeed, the late twentieth century has been characterized by a growing trend towards rights of all sorts, and documents collected in archives (particularly in government archives) have been used to support those rights cases.

²⁵Brown, “Records Acquisition Strategy,” 40.

The genealogical use of archives is another phenomenon (misunderstood and unjustifiably denigrated by archivists) where documents have gained value for the common person. Genealogy is not a new field; although we think of it as a new trend, it has had its peaks and valleys, like everything else. The upper classes in the English-speaking world, including wealthy Americans in the United States, have always been concerned with their pedigrees, family trees, and coats of arms, not to mention the author of the Book of Genesis whose litany of begats most of us have only skimmed. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were characterized by a heightened interest in genealogy, but only since the 1970s and increasingly throughout the 1980s and 1990s has the interest been large-scale, so that now our reading rooms resonate with the whirring of microfilm readers and the excited chit-chat of new connections. Why this has occurred now can be traced to the growth of a large middle-class population with more leisure time on its hands, a population without long roots in its own North American soil, a population trying to make sense of a (postmodern) fractured world. One of the few archivists to understand the phenomenon is Barbara Craig, who suggests that genealogical uses of records "satisfies a deep social need....More and more the cultural role of archives will become important as the anomie of modern society stimulates people to refresh their social bonds."²⁶ The continual complaints expressed by many archivists concerning the problems with genealogists mirror our own sense of anomie: we understand the traditional, historical uses of archives; perhaps we have failed to comprehend the new cultural uses of archives in the postmodern world.

Interestingly, the literary set has adopted a new interest in records as well. Consider, as one example of many, Carol Shields' award-winning novel, *The Stone Diaries*. How can we believe that Daisy Goodwill is fiction when her shopping list and family photographs are presented to us in black and white?²⁷

Even Keith Jenkins, the postmodern historian, has not fallen into an existential nihilism, and confirms the value of examining traces of the past. Indeed, rather than seeing history as a dead-end, he views it as a liberating experience—a valuable and noble pursuit, an empowering activity. For in the postmodern husk of moral relativism and epistemological skepticism is a kernel of social tolerance. In this world of fragmented and decontextualized information, we can now have a multiplicity of histories—consumer-oriented, designer histories:

For viewed not in its traditional guise as a subject discipline aiming at a real knowledge of the past, but seen rather as what it is, a discursive practice that enables present-minded people(s) to go to the past, there to delve around and reorganise it appropriately to their needs, then such history...may well have a radical cogency that can make visible aspects of the past that have previously been hidden or secreted away; that have previously been overlooked or sidelined, thereby producing fresh insights that can actually make emancipatory, material differences to and within the present—which is where all history starts from and returns to.²⁸

²⁶Barbara Craig, "Meeting the Future by Returning to the Past: A Commentary on Hugh Taylor's Transformations," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987–88): 10.

²⁷Carol Shields, *The Stone Diaries* (Toronto: Random House, 1993). Shields' novel is interesting, too, in presenting the story, like a Picasso painting, from different points of view. Her fragmented narrative places her firmly in the postmodernist camp.

²⁸Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 68.

This is the approach-based epistemology that Hugh Taylor refers to in his “Transformations,”²⁹ where historians now represent interest groups: feminists, gays and lesbians, blacks, aboriginals, environmentalists, vegetarians, dead white males, or what have you. Thus, records are used for many purposes, and just as designer-histories can be liberating, so, too, can the functions and uses of records prove liberating to our clientele. As Barbara Craig has said, vigorous debate both within the archival profession and from outside

helps us to understand ourselves better and to conceptualize archives in different ways, as memory, as a sign, as a literary form, as a form of communication, as a record, as a symbol, as a domain of privilege. The process of making these shifts in concepts clearly reveals that archives do not have just one meaning, but rather that they have many meanings that may be in conflict with one another....There is not just one “correct” metaphor that is pursued in archives: there is a vast number.³⁰

Meta-archives

If we understand where archives are situated within the cultural milieu—within post-modern society—then this knowledge can help us with our appraisal, acquisition, description, and reference functions. And it can help us understand why we do what we do. If we look at just one of our functions, appraisal, this becomes apparent. Consider the recent interest in documentation strategy. No archival practice has been rooted so deeply in relativism as this one. Helen Samuels, its chief proponent, explains its components as follows:

The key elements of documentation strategies are an analysis of the universe to be documented, an understanding of the inherent documentary problems, and the formulation of a plan to ensure the adequate documentation of an ongoing issue or activity or geographic area. The strategy is designed, promoted and implemented by records creators, administrators (including archivists) and users. It is an ongoing cooperative effort by many institutions and individuals to ensure the archival retention of appropriate documentation through the application of redefined archival collecting policies, and the development of sufficient resources. The strategy is altered in response to changing conditions and viewpoints.³¹

This is a noble aim. Records are disappearing through neglect or ignorance at a tremendous rate, and many trends and activities reflecting our society are in danger of being lost to posterity for lack of documentation. Documentation strategy is an active, subject-based approach to records collection (and creation if necessary) that would set organicists like Sir Hilary Jenkinson spinning in their graves! I certainly would not argue that documentation strategy is a waste of time; however, it must be seen for what it is: a deliberate act to document a phenomenon that contemporary archivists and others have deemed important. And it advocates constant re-evaluation, thus ensuring a continually presentist view—

²⁹See Taylor, “Transformation in the Archives,” 14.

³⁰Barbara L. Craig, “Looking at Archives from a Bird’s Eye View: Flights of Fancy, Recreation, or Recreation,” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993): 196.

³¹Helen W. Samuels, “Improving Our Disposition: Documentation Strategy,” *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–92): 126.

quite a philosophical departure for the archival profession accustomed to "objectively" preserving the past.

But where did this view come from. Is not, perhaps, documentation strategy a response to the postmodern condition? Seen in this light, we can understand its basis, and the attraction of the method for so many archivists who feel contemporary society is further fragmented by the loss of records. It is also reflective of the general democratizing trend that puts value on just about anything (the "approach-based" epistemology), and, furthermore, is a response to the widening research interests of archives' clientele. Each and every scrap of paper holds potential research value, and archivists live in fear of destroying what they know will someday be useful. Recent articles in *Archivaria* have drawn attention to the value of records useful in documenting the history of marginalized groups (women, gays and lesbians, aboriginals), and recent, trendy phenomena such as environmentalism.³² This is not to say that documenting these groups and activities is not useful or important, or archivally sound. Just simply that we should understand why we choose to document them, why late-twentieth-century society has deemed them worthy of documentation. Rather than sinking into postmodern anomie, we should draw on our strengths, with our eyes open to the reasons for our appraisal strategies. Richard Brown makes the point in his article on archival hermeneutics. He suggests that our faith in a solid theory of records appraisal masks a hocus-pocus approach. In discussing acquisition strategies as a managerial tool for tough economic times, he notes that such rationale

assumes that it is simply a lack of funding that prevents us from properly carrying out our appointed acquisition tasks; that we have in our possession a corpus of archival knowledge adequate to appraise and acquire records with clarity of purpose and in an intellectually valid manner; that we have in waiting a coordinated plan to facilitate the archival selection of our historically significant records. In fact, many of the leading archival institutions (in Canada, at least) would be bound to admit that their acquisition experience has not always proven to be entirely satisfactory; that they most often engage in the assessment and selection of records accumulated either customarily or fortuitously through an acquisition "programme" loosely based on a combination of intuition, familiarity, *ad hoc* procedures and arrangements, and an ill-defined and largely uncoordinated variety of subject, theme, provenance, and media-guided initiatives or orientations.³³

Only by recognizing this subjectivity can we equip ourselves to deal with our collecting function; any claims to objectivity will result in what one author has termed "magic epistemology."³⁴

³²See, for example, Diane L. Beattie, "An Archival User Study: Researchers in the Field of Women's History," *Archivaria* 29 (Winter 1989-90): 33-50; and more recently, Steven Maynard, "The Burning of Wilful Evidence": Lesbian/Gay History and Archival Research;" Mary Ann Plypchuk, "A Documentation Approach to Aboriginal Archives;" and Candace Loewen, "From Human Neglect to Planetary Survival: New Approaches to the Appraisal of Environmental Records," all in *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92).

³³Brown, "Records Acquisition Strategy," 35.

³⁴Thomas Richards is writing not about archival institutions, but rather masses of bits of information accumulated by the British Empire as a means of controlling the external world. He writes, "Magic epistemology returns information to knowledge, giving facts binding force only by desperate recourse to magic. In an age overwhelmed by information, magic is epistemology's last resort, offering the promise of the unity of knowledge." See Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 142.

It is precisely the notion of scientific objectivity in archival practice that Brien Brothman challenges, and in his article, "Orders of Values," he sets out to hold a mirror to that practice so as to reflect its true subjective nature, to show us our complicity in creating value for the documents we keep:

As they strive to maintain these islands of permanent order, then, archives also create value. Archival appraisal, for example, is not merely a process of value identification, but of value creation or destruction....Appraisal and selection aim to achieve this order through the removal of weeds, as part of the process of the creation of a garden of beautiful flowers. Without this, instead of an ordered Eden, the resulting scene would appear like an unruly patch of overgrown weeds and vines....Thus, we are not simply "acquiring" and "preserving" records of value; we are *creating value*, that is, an order of value, by putting things in their proper place, by making place(s) for them.³⁵

The garden we create flourishes only because of the tending we do. Our practices are value-added services that preserve records in one sense, but also obscure their true nature, and mold them to our own devices. Our own particular mythology has been the preservation of objective facts about society, waiting to be discovered by intrepid researchers, and thus "Archivists are accomplices to the staging of objectivity."³⁶

Yet surely Brothman is not advocating abandoning our archival principles of provenance and original order. We still must create order/understanding so that documents can be found and retrieved. But there is a difference between technical methods for making records accessible and succumbing to the tyranny of the process, and I am not suggesting that we dispense with rules for description. How, after all, would we find library books without the Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress classification schemes? However, we must understand the tools and why they have developed as they have. What is the history and structure of their intelligibility? And more importantly, historians and other users of archives must understand this, too. Postmodern historians must situate themselves within their own socially constructed world, *and* must see archives as culturally determined. "It is often forgotten," wrote V.H. Galbraith sixty years ago, "that the archivist has had to do his work in a world whose fundamental conceptions of what history is have been revolutionized, and the work he does is more permanent than the ideas on which it was based."³⁷ This is a crucial point that historians rarely recognize, that what we collect and the processes and permutations we perform on those documents have a profound impact on the final product. "Unfortunately, the effects of archival practice...on the cultural pro-

³⁵Brothman, "Orders of Values," 81–82.

³⁶Brothman, "The Limits of Limits," 214. German archivist, Hans Booms, has gone the furthest in describing the subjectivity of archival practices in his denouncement of political purposes which the former East German archives served. As a counterpoint, he argues that archivists must cast themselves back to the past societies they aim to document, and appraise records based on the contemporary values of the times. While this method sounds useful in theory, it persists in maintaining the fiction that anyone, no matter how politically disinterested, can break through the bars of his or her own subjectively-conditioned mindset. A thoroughly un-postmodern approach! See Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987): 69–107, and "Überlieferungsbildung: Keeping Archives as a Social and Political Activity," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–92): 25–33.

³⁷V.H. Galbraith, *An Introduction to the Use of the Public Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934), 11.

cess in general, and on history book-making in particular, have gone largely unexamined."³⁸

The Diplomatic Imperative

The state of documentation on archival work (meta-archives?) is, as Barbara Craig has phrased it, "like the cobbler's children going poorly shod."³⁹ Yet how can we understand why we do what we do without a sense of our own professional past? Archivists should know better than anyone that a phenomenon can only be understood within its historical context. Why are we so blind to our own history? Like the postmodern historian, Keith Jenkins, who proposes that all history should be historiography, perhaps all archival theory should be archivography, a situating of archival principles and practices within the larger socio-cultural, historical context. We require a radical historicization of archives.

We are aware of how the classifying process with its ties to nineteenth-century rationalism has been problematic for the late twentieth century. It ideally served another age but not our own. These descriptive practices focused on the administrative history of organizations, not on the concrete productions of them, and it is interesting that the debate about the series system developed when it did—when bureaucratic organizations were flattening their hierarchies, breaking traditional chains of command, and engaging in all sorts of activities and reporting structures that cannot be represented in two-dimensional organizational charts.⁴⁰ Describing the office of origin is no longer tantamount to describing the records since records may originate with a multitude of offices, diachronically or synchronically. Hence, since records are concrete objects, unlike bureaucracies which are intellectual constructs, records have become the primary focus for description.

It is no less significant to consider why diplomatics has moved to the forefront in North American archival theory today. Can we deconstruct the diplomatic process itself? Why is a medieval practice being resurrected now in North America? Is it just the cycle of time, or does it have as much to do with the so-called postmodern condition? One can discern a real need for diplomatic techniques in the age of computerized records. With our paper-based, modern records, North American archivists never felt the need for such tools; a knowledge of the historical context was all that was required. After all (one might misguidedly argue), coping with textual documents is second nature to us; we do it everyday in our own personal lives. Now, however, electronic records, like the medieval Latin manuscripts on which diplomatics was first practiced, are foreign entities and require some sort of code book to decipher them. We need a new coping mechanism.

Ironically, archivists are well-suited to respond to postmodernism because of our unique insight into the current "information" society, based on an understanding of records and records-creation. It is our unique perspective to study and describe the cultural transmitters of information, and whether the postmoderns like it or not, records are concrete transmitters of information that exist in the real world. Unlike ideas, government bureaucracies, or human relationships, records exist *in re*. Archivists must realize that their task is to understand the cultural products of society, the cultural expressions that exist in

³⁸Brothman, "The Limits of Limits," 214.

³⁹Barbara L. Craig, "Outward Visions, Inward Glance: Archives History and Professional Identity," *Archival Issues* 17, no. 1 (1992): 119.

⁴⁰Most archivists are by now familiar with the seminal article on the series system by Peter J. Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *American Archivist* 29 (1966): 493-504.

concrete form, whether they be paper, film, or electronic signals. We understand society from its cultural products, not vice versa.

If the postmodernists' problem is not with the records *per se*, but rather with the deterministic (totalitarian/bourgeois) way they are read, and their subversive, untrustworthy nature, then diplomatics in its broadest sense is all the more important. Because despite the theoretical nature of the argument, the records do exist in fact; they just need to be deconstructed/read, not through objective lenses, but through subjective ones. As archivists, we know that physical evidence can tell as much or more about a document and its context as the informational content itself. In this world of Transformers and real time bits and bytes, it is important not to get caught up in a sense of bewilderment, not to be led down a myriad of garden paths in a futile search for right answers. The jigsaw puzzle approach, as Hugh Taylor has said, no longer works. However, as archivists, our professional responsibility is towards the care and control (yes, control!) of the documentary expressions of our culture. Therefore, we must see ourselves and our institutions as full-fledged members of contemporary society, not as entities that stand outside of it with the aim of documenting it objectively. In Brien Brothman's words, "For archivists to abstain from cultural awareness and criticism is tantamount to professional irresponsibility."⁴¹ We must ensure that our focus remains on the records themselves, but we must do so as a willful act of postmodern self-consciousness.

⁴¹Brothman, "Orders of Values," 90.