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# AMERICAN ARCHIVIST



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#### About the Cover

The cover carries an image of the Venerable Bede, the English monk and historian, sharpening his quill. James O'Toole's article "'Commendatory Letters': An Archival Reading of the Venerable Bede" reflects on what a reading of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* tells us about the emerging roles of writing, reading, and records in the eighth century. It also looks at how consideration of these changes can inform perspectives on technological developments in our own time. Reprinted with permission of the Benedictine Monastery, Engelberg, Switzerland. (Engelberg, Stiftsbibliothek cod. 47 fol. 1v).

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## FORUM

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*With the exception of editing for conformity of capitalization, punctuation, and citation style, letters to the Forum are published verbatim.*

### Encoded Archival Description

#### To the editor:

Congratulations to all of those involved in the *American Archivist* special issue on Encoded Archival Description [*American Archivist* 60 (Summer 1997): 264–354]. I read it from cover to cover, absolutely ecstatic about the level of technical and professional achievement and maturity represented by accomplishments to date, and the aspirations for the future of EAD. Progress was all the more impressive to me since I left the archival profession for information systems management in 1982, and aside from occasional meetings with David Bearman have not kept up with developments.

As chair of the National Information Systems Task Force, I had absolutely no expectation that our work would become a catalyst for such success and progress. I am especially proud of the archivists whom we selected as NISTF members (David Bearman, Maynard Brichford, John Daly, Charles Dollar, Larry Dowler, Max Evans, Steven Henson, Tom Hickerson, Charles Palm, and Nancy Sahli). These people continued to make contributions over the years. In my opinion, the major accomplishment of NISTF itself was fostering the archival profession's interest in and responsibility for archival description standards. That is the foundation for all technical achievements.

Richard H. Lytle  
Professor, Information Systems  
College of Information Science and Technology  
Drexel University

### Intrinsic Value

#### To the editor:

I am not prone to writing letters to the editor, but I wish to comment on Ms. Shauna McRanor's article "A Critical Analysis of Intrinsic Value"

[*American Archivist* 59 (Fall 1996): 400–411]. Having been trained in the world of physics and mathematics and then transferring over to the world of archives and history, I am shocked by the shoddy thinking reflected in her article. Despite the pros and cons of the concept of “intrinsic value,” I object to the tone and style of her argument.

The first is her attempt to describe the NARS definition of intrinsic value. She engages in the classic straw-person approach used by most debaters to obscure an issue. She first refers to the NARS definition of intrinsic as “. . . records that have qualities and characteristics . . .” (p. 402) and then refers to several definitions of “intrinsic” drawn from philosophy and the dictionary (pp. 402–03). She then combines the two different concepts in order to create a *reductio absurdum* style of argument. She does this by claiming that NARS defined “qualities and characteristics” as inherent, or inhering, in the records themselves. After creating this position, she easily demolishes it. By defeating a proposition she has created, she has avoided any issue raised by NARS. The rest of the article is based on this misrepresentation.

The NARS definition does not speak of value as inhering in the documents. When defining a term, the theoretician is free from having to conform to any popular concept of the term. Just ask a quantum physicist how large a “barn” is, or see how some philosophers redefine the word “moment.” It is obvious from the NARS definition that “qualities and characteristics” could just as easily “adhere” to a document as “inhere.” This might not be the common usage of “intrinsic” or even my usage, but by reading the whole of the definition it is NARS’ definition. Archives is not just an intellectual game; it deals with real life documents and documents are affected by their place in history. NARS feels that the document’s value is related to its historical contingency.

However, more bothersome is that Ms. McRanor does not understand what the term “theory” means. She is not involved in redefining a term, so she should be consistent with standard usage. Theory is the description of the actions of the world around us. Its purpose is to observe what is going on in the world and to attempt to describe them. When theory is done well it not only describes what is going on, but acts as a springboard to enable us to draw new conclusions, improve action, and thereby to generate a more sophisticated theory. Theory is always drawn from observation and is confirmed by observation. Newton saw the apple fall, and developed a theory. Later on from the same theory he was able to deduce when Halley’s Comet would return. When Ms. McRanor states, that “theory must determine the methods, and the methods must guide the practice . . .” (p. 405) she is not interested in theory, but in ethics or philosophy.

Finally, I found her general tenor offensive. She appears to belittle practicing archivists. Our descriptions of practice, our theory, are not valid be-

cause we did not develop it using her philosophy. We don't need someone deriding us—society does enough of that as is. We need thoughtful reflection on our praxis which encourages better praxis, not someone telling us how wrong we are. Such attitudes are counter-productive.

I have no fault with those who wish to create a philosophy of archives, but let's not call it theory. That is sloppy thinking! I am much more interested in theory, in rational discussion of practice and its critique. But as for the philosophy of archives which behaves as a new ethic, well, I just don't see the need. I would rather soon discuss praxis.

L. Dale Patterson

*Archivist/Records Administrator  
United Methodist Church Archives*

#### **Book Review—Advocating Archives**

##### **To the editor:**

Ben Primer's review of *Advocating Archives: An Introduction to Public Relations for Archivists* [*American Archivist* 60 (Fall 1997): 466–67] was thoughtful and thorough, enough so that I thought it worth responding to him. We are fortunate to have reviewers who apply themselves as diligently as Primer, who is clearly a public relations minded archivist, to the task.

As he points out, there are chapters that might have been included; the prospectus for this book was submitted to SAA in 1989, published in 1994, and is now four years on the street. It was never intended to be a textbook on public relations, as the introduction clearly says (nor were the three end-book examples of case studies in the classic sense, as the introduction also clearly says). I suggested an excellent and thorough handling of museum public relations, written by Donald Adams, for the archivist who wanted such a survey.

Our book aimed to show how experienced archivists, working in their own environment, handle public relations-cum-public outreach. Only one writer had been a public relations professional; the rest were working archivists who were self-taught. Much of what Primer suggests was omitted is easily accessed in the readings supplied after each chapter or in workshops [Paul] Conway and I urge archivists to attend, often given by SAA or regional groups; we emphasize the importance of self-education. Had I wanted to produce the “sweeping reshaping of the archival paradigm” that Primer sought, I would have written it myself. Perhaps he and I, or others with sound outreach/public relations experience in archives, should collaborate on a second book on public relations for this profession—*Advocating Archives* is the first.



Primer raises one point worth advancing, namely, the pursuit of private funding as laid out by Judy P. Hohmann in her chapter, "Money Talk." Primer speaks from his experience as a university archivist when he says that most archivists are buried "several layers beneath the institution's development wizards," though this is not necessarily true, for example, of archivists in historical societies and some independent organizations, or small colleges, nor in university libraries with their own development director. He's right that the development committee model may not work for some institutions; if that cloth doesn't fit, don't wear it. The issue is much more basic: private funding has its own advantages, and not alone the decrease in pounds of paper to be submitted to a prospective public grantor, usually created by one person locked at a desk one week before a deadline. First, as the chapter points out, the staff is involved. As Hohmann says, the process is internal and often includes a number of staff members. The institution—read staff and administration of the archives—must "know itself thoroughly, . . . be unified in its purpose and direction, and . . . its fundraising efforts be planned and well organized." That is, the mission must be clear and the fundraising effort coordinated. Furthermore, private funds, through individual donors or local, regional or other foundations, are far less restricted than most government grants; they need not drive program, as public funding so often does. Thus planned programs are not jarred, they are assisted.

The second advantage is even more cogent: the institution must explain itself to its donor publics in ways it is not required to do in pursuing government grants. Its material must be jargon-free, its aims clear, its archival house in order. As outreach to donors or local or other foundations, private solicitation is an unbeatable tool. Is the money there? It is, and often very close to home. In working as a consultant to small organizations, I found that few considered the money closest to them a source of revenue; most thought only in terms of state or federal grants, though each had donors of papers, family of creators and small foundations close to them. In this time of fiscal retraction, every pocket should be turned out, private and public. Hohmann's chapter focused on an underused source, certainly by archivists: private sector monies. I hope every archivist, new and experienced, reads, adapts and acts upon it.

Elsie Freeman Finch