

BOOK REVIEWS

Elisabeth Kaplan, Editor

Vandals in the Stacks? A Response to Nicholson Baker's Assault on Libraries

By Richard J. Cox. Contributions in Librarianship and Information Science, Number 98. Westport, Conn., and London: Greenwood Press, 2002. 232 pp. Index. Available from the Society of American Archivists, \$59.95 members, \$77.95 nonmembers. ISBN 0-313-32344-5.

With *Vandals in the Stacks?* Richard Cox has developed what must be seen as the last words on a controversy that erupted with the publication of novelist and library critic Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*. Baker's exposé of the preservation community's handling of books, newspapers, and other deteriorating nineteenth-century publications infuriated librarians who built and supported systematic preservation programs in the 1980s and 1990s. Some scholars took sides in publications, e-mail lists, and symposia on both the benefits of preservation technologies and the consequences of high-volume preservation processes. The net result was a significant tempest in a teapot through 2001 that served to draw attention (needed and unwanted in equal measure) to library preservation programs and to the small subset of scholars that depends absolutely on the evidence embedded in the book as a physical artifact.

James O'Toole published a wry review essay on Baker's book in the Fall/Winter 2001 issue of the *American Archivist*. O'Toole draws attention to Baker's tendency to personalize his argument by naming names and exercising his novelist's prerogative to embellish his argument with liberal use of colorful adjectives. Baker is also well known for his nearly obsessive attention to minute details and his transparently exhaustive research. As O'Toole notes, however, "One appreciates Baker's passion, but as with anything else, passion will get you only so far."

Richard Cox brings his own passionate argument to the archival community and makes the case that archivists have as much at stake in the issues that Baker raises as librarians do. Never mind that it is a rare archivist since the 1950s who has used either preservation microfilm or digital imaging technologies as a technique to replace deteriorating paper records—perhaps saving space or simplifying the care and handling of high-volume, relatively low-value archives. Never mind that many of the most egregious problems that Baker identifies in his exposé (especially guillotined books and newspaper "deaccessioning")

largely had been redressed by the preservation community a decade before he wrote. Forget for a minute that the intersection between preservation specialists in the archival and library communities (who have distinctly different approaches to the preservation problem) is extraordinarily small. Cox takes Baker's general argument as a threat to the independence, integrity, and professional competence of the entire cultural heritage community. It is for this reason, initially, that *Vandals in the Stacks?* deserves our attention.

Truth be told, I am possibly the least neutral reviewer of either *Vandals in the Stacks?* or *Double Fold* that could be imagined. I am named in both books as both a source and an example. I headed the Preservation Department at Yale University during the 1990s, picking up from where my predecessor of twenty-two years, Gay Walker, supposedly (according to Baker) conceived of some of the most unconscionable preservation practices imaginable. Baker credits me with seeing the light and ending at Yale the practice of wholesale book-cutting. But I may also be the unfortunate soul who gave Baker the idea, in one of two tape-recorded interviews, for the analogy from the Vietnam War that the army had to destroy the village in order to save it—an analogy that raised the ire of so many scholars. In his introduction to *Vandals*, Cox singles me out as one of the few preservation administrators to receive positive comments in Baker's book. Should I feel fortunate?

I was once a professional archivist and am now engaged with the same digital technologies that Baker assails in *Double Fold*. I've known Richard Cox for nineteen years and have read his works closely enough to know when he is reworking his previously published arguments. The institution for which I presently work, Duke University, will accept the donation of Nicholson Baker's American Newspaper Repository, which consists of the bound volumes of United States newspapers that Baker purchased from the United Kingdom as they were scheduled for pulping. Baker's tale of his dealings with the British Library anchors both *Double Fold* and his article for the *New Yorker* ("Deadline," July 24, 2000) that served as the impetus for the book itself. Baker's punchline for "Deadline" was the following wistful comment: "Maybe someday a research library will want to take responsibility for these things, or maybe not—whatever happens, at least they aren't going to be cut up and sold as birthday presents."

So, with no small sense of trepidation, I suggest that *Vandals in the Stacks?* is the essential companion piece to *Double Fold*, superseding all of the chatter that gushed forth in the months between the two publications' imprint dates. The book is a treatise in ten chapters that begins with an explanation for why Cox decided to write the book and why the reader should and will be interested in what follows. Evidently, he decided to engage Baker directly out of a deep-seated sense of being wronged on a professional level, which in some ways for Cox is indistinguishable from being wronged personally. I write this with not the slightest tinge of cynicism, for Richard Cox is one of the most scholarly and most

caring archivists currently active in the profession. It is fair to say that Cox has read and absorbed the entire corpus of archival literature and has never hesitated to draw upon his encyclopedic command of archival history to make points ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Vandals in the Stacks? assembles in one place references to virtually every published article in the professional and popular press, innumerable e-mail threads and pieces of private communication, as well as commentary on the spectacle that emerged as Cox and Baker confronted each other publicly at a Simmons College symposium in May 2001. The book draws on the Simmons College exchange and expands greatly on Cox's thoughtful critique of *Double Fold* that appeared in the Internet journal *First Monday* (December 2000). The notes for each chapter are extensive and make the book worth the rather hefty price of admission. Of the 212 pages of text, 37 pages (17 percent) are devoted to the 511 notes that document every corner of Cox's argument.

Richard Cox is a critic in the word's classic (OED) definition of "one skillful in judging the qualities and merits of literary or artistic works; one who writes upon the qualities of such works." Cox first takes on the "low hanging fruit" of Baker's assertion in *Double Fold* that every copy and every version of every published work potentially merits retention in its original form as potential cultural evidence. This is actually an old argument, embraced largely by a small group of scholars of the history of the book, but given credence by cultural historians and others who are mining three-dimensional artifacts for new evidence of human activity. G. Thomas Tanselle has long provided the most compelling and persuasive argument for preserving the intrinsic value of (especially) the published record. He writes in *Raritan* (Spring 2002), "If we are interested in the human past, we must take care of the objects that constitute our inheritance." Few archivists or librarians accept the "keep everything" argument and, along with records managers, they have developed elaborate collection development and appraisal theories and practices to winnow the mass of human evidence down to its essential core.

As his argument unfolds in the later chapters, Cox wanders far from Baker's concerns about library preservation to encompass both a broad critique of the archival profession's insularity and a detailed critique of Baker's writings on libraries in general. Cox lays into Baker's concern with the tendency of libraries to discard card catalogs after retrospective conversion of the bibliographic information has been complete. Cox discusses at length Baker's attack on the San Francisco Public Library for withdrawing and discarding some 250,000 volumes as out of scope and unable to be accommodated in a newly constructed building. Cox also talks about himself quite a bit; the reader will learn about his career choices and his teaching style at the University of Pittsburgh, where he is professor in the School of Information Sciences.

By chapter 8, Cox is ready to take on Baker's phobias regarding technology. I read the chapter intently, anticipating a scathing point-counterpoint. Cox works

hard to develop an argument that Baker is a technological Luddite, but fails to make the connection. Instead, in an ingenious example of how “two can play this game,” Cox expropriates a methodology that Baker himself developed in an earlier article in the *New Yorker* (June 12, 1995). For “Books as Furniture,” Baker pored over hundreds of mail-order catalogs from places like Pottery Barn to examine how books are used as props to create an appropriately enticing sales environment. Similarly, Cox scoured the full run of *Wired* magazine in search of how books are portrayed and discussed in both advertising and in the text of articles. His conclusion—that books and technology are intertwined and mutually reinforcing—is not dissimilar to the argument that Baker presents in his own writings.

When all is said and done, I fear that Richard Cox’s beef with Nicholson Baker was not his fight to fight. He made his essential points in the *First Monday* piece, and the book itself is loaded with rhetoric that is quite frankly beside the point. Few people, other than the most introspective archivists, will care or should care about how Baker’s argument may or may not relate to an obscure (but really interesting!) report from the 1980s on the image of archivists. Fewer still will want to read two chapters on the tendency of archivists to write for and speak to each other nearly exclusively. Cox mentioned in both the introduction and in the final chapter of the book that his argument is addressed primarily to archivists and that he is “thinking about” writing for a broader audience. Perhaps this focus on archivists accounts for the fact that *Vandals in the Stacks?* has an Amazon.com sales rank (January 2004) of 678,780, while *Double Fold*, not anybody’s idea of a page turner, is headed for the best seller lists (in 100 years or so) with an Amazon sales rank of 29,055. In many ways, *Vandals in the Stacks?* says far more about the obsessions of archivists than about a novelist with an obsession for libraries.

Double Fold and *Vandals in the Stacks?* belong together, literally, and should find the literary equivalent of eternal rest in the research libraries of the world. Both books are printed on acid-free paper and bear the “infinity” imprint that marks them as preservation quality. Unfortunately, only personal collections will likely permit the sort of physical colocation that they deserve. At Duke, one of the few remaining research libraries to classify books in the Dewey Decimal system, the two books stand half a chance of living together on the same shelf, sharing the primary call number 025.2. Elsewhere, where Library of Congress classification reigns supreme, Z695 (Baker) and Z687 (Cox) may be ranges or even floors apart, the arguments contained therein destined to be discovered serendipitously. For we can only hope that the last words have been uttered on this subject.

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