

LIBRARIANS AND ARCHIVISTS—SOME ASPECTS OF THEIR PARTNERSHIP

FOR some time after I was asked to deliver an address on this subject before this group I was puzzled as to why I had been so honored. After thinking it over, however, it occurred to me that the answer probably lies in the well-known fact that there is a widespread and possibly justifiable suspicion and resentment throughout the grass roots areas of the country of the experts and academic theorists in Washington who, it is alleged, are trying to force their completely impracticable ideas and theories on the rest of the nation. It appears probable, therefore, that I have been chosen to speak to you on this subject because no one can possibly accuse me of being an academic expert in the theory or principles of either library or archival science, for there can be few persons here who are more unlettered in these fields than I. On the other hand, though profoundly aware of having no special training or learning in these fields, almost seven years of dusty experience in the handling, use, arrangement, and description of archival materials have resulted in my case in the growth of certain convictions on these matters, convictions which are rather fiercely held by myself and most of my colleagues.

It should be said at the outset that no one can doubt that libraries and archival institutions must of necessity work closely together. It is, of course, perfectly apparent that no archival agency can function efficiently without a good library as part of its working equipment. There is no need to labor this point, but there is also no need to jump from such a premise to the conclusion that archival agencies and libraries ought to be governed by the same principles, and that techniques which are sound in the one agency are equally sound in the other. It would seem that some of the rather spirited discussion which has recently arisen in this field probably has a part of its origin in certain very strong human characteristics. Historically, of course, libraries are far more ancient institutions than archival agencies. In fact in most countries archival institutions have had their first origins as appendages to libraries. Certainly in this country the first agency of the federal government which attempted to collect archival materials from all government agencies was the Library of Congress, which naturally enough placed such archival materials in its Manuscripts

Division. Similarly, many state archival agencies had their first beginnings in the manuscripts room attached to the state library or historical society. It has been quite natural, therefore, for librarians, who have been the first to whom custody of archival materials has been given, to try to extend their techniques, skills, and practices to include the archival materials which have been placed in their charge. This is a very understandable tendency which occurs in almost all human institutions. Some librarians have possibly never had clearly in their minds the difference between a manuscripts room whose holdings consist largely of collections of private manuscripts, and an archival agency. In fact there is daily evidence at the National Archives that a great many persons still think of the National Archives as a tremendously enlarged version of the manuscripts room of a state historical society or of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress. It should not be necessary here to point out that there is a fundamental difference in character between the collection of personal papers and private memorabilia which ordinarily find their way to manuscript rooms and those organized bodies of records resulting from the functioning of a governmental agency or private institution or organization which are properly called archives.

It has been said that when the records of a government agency are transferred to an archival institution they undergo a sort of sea-change, and that this change justifies radical changes in the arrangement and organization of those records. This argument assumes that records transferred to an archival agency will seldom, if ever, again be used for administrative purposes by the governmental agency which created them. It goes on the assumption that once records have been transferred to an archival agency the only persons who will thenceforward be interested in them will be scholars, historians, and others of that ilk. This is, of course, true of the materials ordinarily deposited with state historical societies and in manuscripts rooms. It is very far from being the case with true archival materials. Just last week I had occasion to use certain letterbooks containing the domestic correspondence of the Secretary of State for the years 1790-1791, but when I called for them I was informed by our Division of State Department Archives that they were on loan to the State Department, which was making use of them in connection with what it apparently deemed to be current business. From

among the records which are in the custody of the Division of Interior Department Archives, the General Land Office and the Office of Indian Affairs call many times each week for records one hundred years old or more which are needed for examination in connection with current business in their offices. It is desired to know what reward an Indian agent promised a band of Indians in Oregon if they would move to a reservation, a reward which the Indians may still be seeking to collect, or what the owner claimed to be the proper boundaries of a California ranch at the time of the cession of California by Mexico to the United States. Certainly by far the largest portion of the services rendered by the National Archives on the records in its custody are to the agencies that deposited them with us. This is not to say that we do not also serve historians and scholars, but, possibly to the surprise of the American Historical Association, which for so long agitated for the establishment of a national archival agency, the major portion of the time of the staff of that agency is now spent in being of service to the federal government rather than to the historical profession. And quite properly so.

Let us assume for the moment, however, that it is true that once records are in an archival agency the governmental unit which placed them there will rarely, if ever, again be interested in them, and that it is as raw material for scholarly works only that they are valuable. On the basis of that assumption it has been said that the sole criterion of the proper organization and classification of records in an archival agency ought to be their usefulness to the searcher, and that therefore the arrangement and organization of the records as they come to the agency can be safely disregarded. From this one is led to the conclusion that, inasmuch as searchers usually are interested in certain specific subjects, records should be arranged to facilitate their use by persons interested in those subjects. Hence, it is said, records coming into an archival agency ought to be arranged according to their subject content, much as books coming into a library are classified. It seems to me that there is a fundamental fallacy in this notion, the fallacy being in the assumption that the individual documents of which archival collections are composed, are comparable with the individual volumes of which a library is made up. This is perhaps a natural error into which to fall. A single sheet of paper or several sheets which have been bound or clipped together is a physically discrete unit just as is an individual volume.

Yet the unit with which the archivist properly deals in arranging and describing his records is not the individual document or dossier, but the entire group of records received from an operating agency of the government. It is our thesis that the entire record group must stand together. Once broken into its component parts and distributed, it has little or no meaning.

Perhaps I can make my meaning more clear by illustration. Suppose that a librarian on accessioning a newly published book—let us say a textbook on modern European history—finds on examining it that it has many separate chapters each dealing with a clearly defined subject. There is a chapter on modern France, a chapter on modern England, a chapter on modern Germany, etc. The librarian, knowing that he has many other volumes containing chapters on the modern history of Western Europe should, according to the theory which archivists have been urged to practice, thereupon say to himself: "Why should I keep this book in its present form? After all, would it not be convenient to have all our materials on modern France in one place on the shelf and all our materials on modern Germany in another place?" He would thereupon proceed to break up the volume, and in fact to break up all other volumes on modern Europe in his custody, and assemble all chapters on modern France in one place on his shelves, all chapters on modern Germany in another place, etc. In other words, he would destroy the integrity and unity of the books he has received in order to arrange their contents into a subject system of his own devising. This, of course, trained librarians do not do, although there are many untrained persons who have done just that with books which they own. But why don't librarians do this? Apart from the sheer physical difficulties of such a procedure, it is obvious that to follow a policy of this kind would be not only to outrage the author of the volume but to render his book meaningless. (Also, of course, it must be said that librarians have developed a technique which to some extent substitutes a catalogue card for the dismembered sections of the book of which we have been speaking.) However, any treatment of any subject in a book has meaning only insofar as it read in the light of the author's treatment of the entire field which he has undertaken to study. An historian's analysis of modern France in a chapter of a book on Western Europe derives much of its significance from a study of his treatment of France's neighbors. To tear it out of the book of which

it is a part and place it among all other chapters or paragraphs on France found in books of other authors would be to make this book and all others treated in such a fashion almost completely devoid of inner significance or meaning.

Precisely the same thing is true of the records received from an agency of the government. That agency may be large or small, but its records have meaning only insofar as they are kept together and their organic relationship to each other retained. As long as that relationship is retained, that body of records has harmony, symmetry, and significance. In short, it is alive. To dismember it, and to distribute the chopped-up parts to the four corners of an archival depository is to destroy the life which makes the content of that body of records meaningful. Physically what would be left would be, as we say of corpses, the remains. But the vitality of the bodily structure would have been destroyed, and the separate parts which remained would have lost all meaning. Let me repeat that the physical dismemberment of an organized body of the archives of an agency is as outrageous and destructive an act as the physical dismemberment of a book, and it is only because some librarians have fallen into the misconception of thinking of a single document in an archival collection as being analogous to a book that they would even propose such a practice. It is rather the record group which is the true archival analogue for the book which constitutes the indivisible unit with which a librarian deals.

Let us, however, proceed further along this line and examine some of the results that follow from the breaking up and reorganization of bodies of archives according to their subject content. This need not be entirely an hypothetical discussion. The practice has been tried in this country and abroad and every time it has been tried it has failed disastrously and after a period of time has been abandoned. It was tried in France in the middle of the nineteenth century to the eternal regret of French archivists. It has been tried in Mexico for the records of the colonial period, to the regret of the present day Mexican archivists and of all scholars who now try to use those records. More recently, in this country, it has been tried by the archival agency of one of our large government departments, which has now placed its records in the National Archives. In this last case, the original organization of many of the older records of that agency has been completely broken up and rearranged on a plan based on

the theory that future students would be interested in what took place in a particular geographic area, rather than in the work of a particular office. This is fine for those who happen to be interested in a particular area but most other persons find the records exceedingly difficult to use.

This leads us to another of the central fallacies in the notion that archival records should be arranged by subject. It is literally impossible to anticipate which subjects searchers will be interested in, or what type of arrangement will best suit their needs. Hence it is always infinitely more satisfactory to leave the arrangement of records as they are, for that is an organization which we can learn and make use of, while a reorganization means simply disorganization. It is true that practically all persons doing historical research favor subject arrangement. They are in favor of the segregation of all materials relating to their particular subject. To them that seems the natural way to arrange records. By way of illustration—in the National Archives we have had many a bustling young assistant professor of history dash in early in the morning and inform us that he is writing a biography of Senator Jones. He has just finished examining the Jones papers in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress and now would like to see our Senator Jones collection. He usually states as an afterthought that he has only a day and a half to spend here. We treat this type of young man with the utmost kindness but inform him that we do not have a Senator Jones collection. What we have are the records of all the government bureaus which were in existence during the twenty year period that Mr. Jones was a United States senator. He undoubtedly corresponded with a great many of these bureaus and there are therefore probably scores of letters to and from him in the files of these bureaus. In order to find them, however, our searcher will have to settle down to an examination of the correspondence registers and indexes of all of these bureaus for that period a task that probably will take longer than a day and a half. On hearing this explanation, the impatient young scholar frequently says yes, he can understand how the National Archives, being a young institution, has not yet had time to arrange its records, but when do we think we will have the Jones letters segregated so that he can easily use them? On being informed that it is not our intention ever to pull all of the Jones letters out of all of the various governmental files in which they exist

and assemble them permanently in one place, these searchers sometimes express incredulity and even anger. On one occasion such a searcher practically threatened to report the stupidity of a division chief to his superiors. To him, the sensible, natural thing to do with the records in that division was to pull out all of the letters in all of the correspondence files of the bureaus and arrange them alphabetically by person.

Well, let us suppose for a minute that by rubbing a magic lamp we could overnight set up a tremendous series of papers arranged by senators and congressmen. Suppose all of the letters in all of the correspondence files of all government departments were segregated or arranged by the name of the person to whom a letter had been sent or from whom a letter had been received. If that were to be done today, inevitably tomorrow morning a young man would come in who would say that he was interested in the history of Alaska. We would then have to tell him: "Sorry, we did have the files of the Interior Department, the Agriculture Department, and the War Department agencies which have Alaska functions, but they no longer exist as such. They have all been broken up and reassembled alphabetically by the names of the persons with whom these departments corresponded." He would naturally think that this was an extremely stupid thing to have done, and that the obvious way to arrange records is to assemble together all materials relating to a particular geographic area. (Incidentally, that is the way most state or local historical societies think the records in the National Archives ought to be arranged.) But suppose that we could overnight again effect the rearrangement of all the records in the National Archives by geographic area. The very next morning a young man would come in interested in the history of railroads. We should have to tell him that at one time we did have the records of the Interstate Commerce Commission, the Commissioner of Railroads, the Railroad Land Grant Division of the General Land Office, etc., but that these no longer exist as such because they have been broken up and distributed among new divisions which had just been created, in which all records relating to particular geographic areas had been assembled together. This again would seem to this man to have been an act of great stupidity.

In short, the subject arrangement of archival materials, by which I mean the actual physical breaking up of record groups and reassem-

bling the documents pertaining to particular subjects, is an attempt to anticipate what subjects persons are going to be interested in and to arrange them in such a manner as to please all such persons, which is an obvious impossibility. To cite another instance—the case of the department mentioned a few minutes ago, which rearranged all of its records according to activities in designated geographic areas. Very recently, for purposes connected with the prosecution of the war, it was deemed desirable to attempt to discover precisely how certain overseas offices of that department functioned during the last war—exactly what personnel and officers were necessary in these overseas offices, how these offices were organized and administered, what were the most difficult administrative problems they encountered, and how these problems were overcome. In other words, what was needed was the living, organized files of an office, arranged precisely as they had existed at the time when that office was a functioning unit. It has been practically impossible to obtain that information from the files as they have been reorganized. Granted that it would have been exceedingly difficult in 1919 for anyone to anticipate that someone twenty-four years later would want to know what the administrative routine and administrative problems of a particular agency of the American government in Europe in 1917-1918 were, but that is exactly what is wanted today and the files in their present form do not yield that information, except with the greatest of difficulty.

It is precisely because no one ever can know to what use records may be put in the future that the breaking up and reorganization of record groups according to preconceived scheme is always a catastrophe. This is not to say that records of a particular unit of an agency or of an agency itself cannot be better arranged if they come to us in complete confusion, or if the original arrangement itself is a very poor one. The point is that records of one agency should never be broken up and shuffled together or physically intermixed with records of another agency, even though they both apparently deal with the same subject.

One may ask, "Is there no answer to this problem? Is there no way in which a person who is interested in a particular subject can know what materials there are in an archival agency which may be of interest to him?" Certainly it is desirable to inform persons interested in making use of archival materials what records contain

information that will be useful to them. This can be done, not by rearranging the records themselves, but by the production of check-lists, guides, and other types of finding mediums which list the record groups and the series within record groups which contain information on a particular subject.

Using this technique, the record groups can be analyzed and described in relationship to their value to any given searcher interested in any given subject and he will know which of those record groups or parts of record groups will repay attention from him. Meanwhile the integrity of the records themselves has been retained. That, it seems to me, is the only feasible answer to the problem of subject analysis of archival materials.

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