

From Practice to Theory: Fundamentals US Style

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Archival Fundamental Series of the Society of American Archivists

Understanding Archives and Manuscripts. JAMES M. O'TOOLE. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990. 79 p. ISBN 0-931828-77-5.

Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts. F. GERALD HAM. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993. v. 106 p. ISBN 0-931828-84-8.

Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts. FREDERIC M. MILLER. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990. 131 p. ISBN 0-931828-75-9.

Preserving Archives and Manuscripts. MARY LYNN RITZENTHALER. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993. ix. 225 p. ISBN 0-931828-94-5.

Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts. MARY JO PUGH. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992. 123 p. ISBN 0-931828-82-1.

Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories. THOMAS WILSTED and WILLIAM NOLTE. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1991. 105 p. ISBN 0-931828-78-3.

A Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers. LEWIS J. BELLARDO and LYNN LADY BELLARDO. comps. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992. viii. 45 p.

Introduction

Twenty years ago, after a long career, Herman Kahn summed up the outlook on theory and practice in the United States in these words:

One of the surprising things about the archival vocation in this country is that, although ours is an ancient profession, except for one or two basic principles practically the entire content of courses in archival science is derived from archival experience in this country during the past thirty five

or forty years. In other words, if you look at what students in our archives courses are now being told about methods of arrangement and description, about archival appraisal, about access policies and research and reference use, and about architectural design and physical equipment, one realizes that what is being taught today is almost entirely merely a distillation of what we have learned from doing these things in this country in the past forty years.¹

Kahn might have simply said, in this country we work from practice to theory. Much has changed since then, but, to judge by the underlying assumptions of this fundamental series, the homegrown and pragmatic *modus operandi* which Kahn celebrates remains deeply engrained in the profession in the United States.

In her preface to each volume, the Series Editor, Mary Jo Pugh, tells us that this new series “discusses the theoretical principles that underlie archival practice, the functions and activities which are common within the archival profession, and the techniques that represent the best of current practice.” She and her collaborators hope that it will be “a benchmark of archival literature for many years to come.” The various authors strive to raise the series from the mode of manual writing of its predecessor to a comprehensive statement of the ruling concepts, established methods, and common practices of the profession. In short, this new venture aims to be a series of fundamental texts for the profession in the United States. There is no doubt of the need, but how well does this series succeed? To answer that question, I shall compare the subjects broached in the old manual series with those in the new series and in light of current US educational standards, and then evaluate each of the volumes in the series, with the exception of the glossary, which I have already reviewed extensively elsewhere.²

Fundamental Subjects

Any such undertaking as the one under review necessarily makes a statement about archival knowledge by the subjects it selects. This series, like the earlier one, has works on the central archival tasks of appraisal, arrangement and description, preservation, and reference service, but has eschewed security, surveys, exhibits, automated access, maps and architectural drawings, photographic collections, public programmes, and reprography, each of which had a volume devoted to it in the earlier series. The new series adds three new works. The one by O’Toole aims to treat the vital matter of the nature of archives together with the evolution of archival institutions and the profession in the United States. Another revises and expands the glossary first published twenty years ago. The third by Wilsted and Nolte examines the management of archival institutions. Technical questions (security, automated access, reprography) have given way to works on central archival functions. Other subjects (surveys, exhibits, public programmes) and special materials (maps, architectural drawings, and photographs) have been subsumed in the new configuration or have disappeared in the move from “basic manual” to “foundation of archival theory and practice.” The old series in fact “grew like Topsy” as the Society responded to the need for publications on any and all aspects of archival work. This time, the series sets out to characterize the fundamental realms of knowledge of the archivist.

It is interesting to compare this choice of subjects with those regarded as fundamental in the Society of American Archivists' recently approved *Guidelines for the Development of a Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies*.³ The *Guidelines* break the curriculum down into three areas: contextual knowledge, archival knowledge, and complementary knowledge. Like the old one, this new series has nothing, perhaps reasonably, to say about US organizational history, although it is a pity that somewhere the archivist's interest in and method of studying administrative history is not addressed. More seriously, the series fails to build on the work of Trudy and Gary Peterson to expose archivists to knowledge of the law in their volume in the earlier series.⁴ The Petersons treated the application of law to direct concerns of the archival repository; beyond that, however, archivists must be equipped with an understanding of the legal system as the context in which all archives are generated, maintained, accessed, and disposed.

In an equally important omission, the series does not have a volume on records management, a prominent subject in the archival knowledge area. The *Guidelines* call for study of "organizational theory as [it relates] to the culture, structure, procedures, processes, and communication systems of records creating bodies," and of how records are created, organized, controlled, maintained, used, and disposed in organizations.⁵ This omission only reinforces the notion that archivists restrict themselves to the treatment of records in the historical repository, and have no disciplinary interest in them before they arrive there. Do archivists still regard the study of records in their administrative context as being outside the sphere of their fundamental knowledge, and therefore their field of action? Are we still, in the age of electronic records, only interested in records management as the necessary evil someone else must attend to in order to set up archival acquisition? Omitting study of the generation and management of records in the modern office keeps the archivist intellectually captive in the historical repository.

First Order Fundamentals

The omissions that I have just mentioned might have been ameliorated had the introductory volume by James O'Toole realized his objective of "understanding... records—where they have come from, what they are made of, what services they perform, how they can be organized and managed, and how they are used...."⁶ Those are all fundamental matters of archival inquiry, but O'Toole gets sidetracked from addressing them directly. Part of the problem seems to be that he aims his work "for the beginning archivist, for the archival student, for the administrator contemplating establishment of an archives, and for the potential donor thinking about depositing records in an archives."⁷ In trying to write a book for such diverse audiences with such different needs, he loses sight of his own objective. That is a pity, because this series, and the profession as a whole, badly needs a fundamental text on the nature of records; for everything that is done to them requires a deep understanding of the characteristics of a record and of the various aggregations into which they accumulate.

O'Toole organizes his contribution to the series into four chapters. The first examines record-keeping, the second the history of archival institutions and the

profession, the third the knowledge and values of the archivist, and the fourth the archivist's responsibilities and duties.

The first task, one would think, is to seat in the reader's mind what an archival document or record is. This admittedly traditional approach is nevertheless fundamental to all other understanding that this series seeks to promote. Unfortunately, it does not recommend itself to O'Toole, who begins his introduction with the statement that "recorded information is everywhere in modern society," and then, a little later, goes on to say,

Several professions share the responsibility to care for and manage recorded information. Archivists, librarians, curators, records managers, and automated data specialists are among those who preserve, organize, and make accessible records [recorded information or documents is what he means here] of one kind or another. In the past, these professions too often tended to emphasize their distinctions from one another, largely on the basis of the physical format [?] of the information they held.

It is difficult to see what he is driving at in this passage, because he goes on to say that his purpose "is to understand *that portion* [emphasis mine] of the world of recorded information encompassed by the phrase "archives and manuscripts," which, rather unhelpfully, he takes to be "the recorded information of individuals, organizations and institutions." He then offers, almost in passing, what amounts to the closest he will come to a definition of records:

Those records are produced as a result of some activity, whether grand or mundane, and preserved because they have both an immediate and a long-term usefulness. They come in a variety of physical forms, but their intellectual significance is more crucial than their format. Archives and manuscripts are not necessarily "old stuff"; they may also include valuable records of the very recent past—even yesterday. What makes the records archives is neither age nor appearance, but rather content, meaning and usefulness.⁸

If we summarize O'Toole's assertions and their unstated implications, we have something like this: records constitute a portion of the world of recorded information; regardless of their form, records are produced as a result of the activity of individuals, organizations, and institutions, and are preserved for their continuing usefulness. Clear as this may be made to be, I sincerely doubt that unknowledgeable persons could penetrate the terminological confusions to grasp these absolutely fundamental concepts at the root of the nature of archives. Certainly, they would be puzzled by the claim that records become archives when we consider their content, meaning, and usefulness, because, at this juncture, O'Toole never explicitly says that he regards archives as records that have made their way into an historical repository. However, one may infer that he does from innumerable statements he makes here and there along the way. The matter only becomes worse when an unexplained distinction is made between archives and manuscripts.

The chapter on record-keeping does not clarify the matter. After offering a brief summary of the transition from the oral world to the literate world of recorded information, O'Toole launches into a categorization of the reasons for recording

