

Book Reviews

Lester J. Cappon and the Relationship of History, Archives, and Scholarship in the Golden Age of Archival Theory. RICHARD J. COX, ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004. 234 p. ISBN 1-931666-07-5.

Richard Cox has successfully undertaken an important task in collecting, selecting, and editing written works by Lester J. Cappon. This project is of course very different from the collections of essays written to honour Canadian archival luminaries. In these collections, contemporary commentators have summarized, synthesized, situated, and re-sited the careers, written works, and influences of such remarkable associates as Hugh Taylor and Kent Haworth.¹ As Taylor did in a later work,² Lester Cappon appears to us alone on stage and we work through his evolving theories from essay to essay. Cappon will be an unfamiliar name to most Canadians. Cox allows that Cappon is not now well known in the United States either, even though he was enormously influential to the development of the archival system in that country.³ Lester Cappon (1900–1981) was an archivist, historian, and documentary editor – sometimes all three at once. Richard Cox has provided an excellent introduction that retraces Cappon’s career and situates him within a larger set of events concurrent with the development of the archival profession in the United States.⁴ He then lets Cappon’s articles and essays stand by themselves with no intrusive

1 Reuben Ware, Marion Beyea, and Cheryl Avery, eds., *The Power and Passion of Archives: A Festschrift in Honour of Kent Haworth* (Ottawa, 2005); Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination. Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992).

2 Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds, eds., *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor* (Maryland, 2003).

3 Cox refers to the “occasional” citation to Cappon’s essays and, indeed, several notes referring to Cappon’s editorial work appeared in a recent article by Randall Jimerson, “Documents and Archives in Early America,” *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005), pp. 235–58.

4 The introduction is a useful stand-alone piece that appeared as such in the *American Archivist*, vol. 68, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2005), pp. 74–112.

editorializing, just requisite explanatory footnotes. He is right to consider Cappon worthy of a retrospective. The past *is* prologue. We can gain many useful insights from studying the pioneers who, from a different location in history, worked through many critical issues to the benefit of subsequent generations of professional archivists. While Cox relates the trajectory of this astonishing career in his introduction, he does not tell us enough about Cappon the individual. There are no details about Cappon's life that would have allowed us to place him in any context that would personalize his achievements. It was something of a relief to find out that he liked bourbon and was an "outdoorsman" (p. 28). Otherwise, we picture him crouched over his desk, working endlessly on articles, speeches, essays, his *Atlas of American History* and his two-volume edition of the correspondence of presidents Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, while simultaneously helping to get the fledgling archival profession off the ground, promoting the Society of American Archivists, and working for the independence of the US National Archives.

The articles that Cox collected were published between 1952 and 1982. Many of them appeared in the *American Archivist* or other scholarly journals such as the *William and Mary Quarterly*. Cappon's writing is elegant though the gendered language is grating to our contemporary ears. The book has been divided into four sections with pertinent articles reflecting Cappon's individual interests and areas of expertise: "Archival Theory," "Archival Collecting," "Archivists and Historians," and "Archivists and Documentary Editors." But what does Cappon have to say to us in those articles? For Canadians, less than would have been the case were it not for our admirable "total archives" tradition. Cappon wrote at length about what he saw as the artificial divisions between "archives" and "historical manuscripts." A glance northward would no doubt have given him a model that would have met with his approval. And yet, it is enormously helpful to any archivist to review the genesis of their profession and to understand that we have not miraculously arrived where we are today without discussions, debates, compromises, and reconciliations. Nor are the issues that we currently struggle with entirely new. The blurred boundaries between professions remain, especially in our smaller archival institutions where it is not unusual for the archivist to be simultaneously a records manager, a historian and even, like Cappon, a documentary editor. As to the latter, not even the largest public archives undertakes expensive and resource-draining documentary publishing programs any more; many of us, however, undertake documentary editing projects in the course of digitizing materials and contextualizing them for presentation on our websites.

Cappon was a firm believer in the essential connection between historian and archivist. The archivist must not only be a historian by education and training, but once ensconced in the profession, is, *de facto*, a historian. Archivists were to avoid becoming "mere technicians" (much less librarians); Cappon emphasized at every opportunity that both archivists and manuscript

custodians were historians at heart. He viewed archives as neutral and a critical gateway for historians to reach the truth of the past. Issues about the response of the archivist to the needs of the historian are reiterated in several of the articles. Topics covered included the creation of more and better finding aids, and a discussion of the archivist as active collector of historical records. Cappon was well ahead of his time in acknowledging that many subject areas had not been well documented and his wrestling with the idea of archivist as proactive collector is evident in his writing. He seems to have desired active collecting, but on a limited scale. He certainly did not want the “subjective judgment” of the archivist to “take priority over that of the historian” (p. 83). He also worried about the huge volume of records generated by an increasingly bureaucratized society. His difficulty dealing with the masses of material and the time spent on appraisal have a current ring to them. The way that Cappon worked through issues that are at the foundation of the archival profession is important to our understanding of the profession as it has evolved. If we see the world differently – if there are many archivists who no longer have any confidence in the possibility of a truthful reconstruction of the past being created through empirical research using archival documents, and, if there are respected and important archival professionals who see their profession as wholly independent of history – it does not diminish the work of theorists like Cappon who were struggling with many of the same themes as we face but who came to different conclusions appropriate to their time and place. And in reading Cappon’s essays, one finds that many of his conclusions have retained their relevance and lead us to revisit our own positions on key issues, which is what any good retrospective should do.

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Fight or Pay: Soldiers’ Families in the Great War. DESMOND MORTON. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004. 326 p. ISBN 0-7748-1108-0.

On 17 March 1916, Agnes Georgeson wrote to her husband’s commanding officer about her family situation: “I aint [*sic*] getting my money from the army the way I ought to ... [The Patriotic Fund] will do nothing not even groceries. They have been awful nasty to me, wont [*sic*] listen to me at all, just turn me right down. I wonder how they expect me and my 3 children to exist ... I have to get money soon or I must have my husband home to see if he can’t get a job, as we are practically starving” (p. 105).

Desmond Morton’s latest book, *Fight or Pay: Soldiers’ Families in the Great War*, demonstrates how Canada’s ability to recruit soldiers was directly linked to their families’ financial situation. A farmer or factory worker was