

From Polders to Postmodernism: A Concise History of Archival Theory. JOHN RIDENER. Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, LLC, 2009. xix, 184 p. ISBN 978-0-9802004-5-4.

On page three of *From Polders to Postmodernism: A Concise History of Archival Theory*, John Ridener declares his subject to be “archival theory as embodied by appraisal theory.” Since the functions of archives extend considerably beyond appraisal, this is surely an unnecessary and self-imposed limitation. And since Ridener’s history reaches back roughly one hundred years, to the publication of the Dutch *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (1898), it is unclear whether Ridener’s period of study is too short or too long: too short because he has neglected the long history of archival selection that predates the *Manual*, or too long because it is not until Schellenberg that appraisal *per se* became the principal means of effecting archival selection. Although earlier eras did not rely on appraisal to reduce abundant information for archival retention, they nonetheless preserved only a partial selection of the available records. In collapsing the distinction between appraisal and other forms of archival selection, Ridener’s narrative becomes somewhat teleological. Nonetheless, Ridener’s analysis is more nuanced than his overly bold topic statement would seem to allow, and his book is an ably guided tour through a century of thought on archival selection.

Samuel Muller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin, the authors of the Dutch *Manual* often have been characterized as promoting the retention of all documentary traces. The careful reader of the *Manual* will find this representation unsatisfactory, for its primary focus is on standardizing arrangement and description – though standardization may be the wrong term for a work that, as noted by Ridener, defends both “centralized and localized practice” (p. 29). According to the *Manual*, the solution to the problem of overabundant documentation was to exclude materials through archival arrangement. Any records that were not in the custody of the creator as part of the creator’s official records were to be excluded from the archive. In passages from the *Manual* not quoted by Ridener, the Dutch authors go to great lengths to demonstrate that personal papers, even those of a key official, do not belong in the archive. Though they did not have to deal with the same degree of information abundance as later periods, it is evident that Muller, Feith, and Fruin were keen to discern and render accessible the most valuable holdings within Dutch archives – a point that Ridener emphasizes in his analysis.

Similarly, Sir Hilary Jenkinson is mischaracterized by Ridener and in some archival literature, as a bureaucrat who advocated a passive role for archivists, accessioning whatever documentary traces creators choose to hand over. Jenkinson’s theory of the record demands that we think otherwise. Jenkinson requires archivists to be gatekeepers who carefully sift documen-

tary traces to identify the subset that meets his highly restrictive definition of archives. Ridener notes that “[t]hese stringent criteria [i.e. Jenkinson’s definition of archives] were likely to allow archivists to avoid explicit appraisal decisions in favor of rejecting possible material for an archive on the basis of custody or lack of original order” (p. 54). In other words, appraisal is not necessary if documents are selected through a strict definition of archives. (Though elsewhere he characterizes Jenkinson as advocating a passive role for archivists, Ridener’s analysis is sufficiently nuanced to take note of this aspect of Jenkinson’s writings.)

Qualitative archival selection was finally codified in the writings of T.R. Schellenberg into what we now call appraisal theory, complete with his hierarchies of primary and secondary values. What was truly innovative about Schellenberg’s approach to archival selection, Ridener suggests, was his frank admission of subjectivity in the process. Ridener explores Schellenberg’s conflicting attitudes toward subjectivity and objectivity, noting that while Schellenberg occasionally viewed subjectivity as the saving grace of modern archives, providing a quick and easy way to identify key archival records, he more often than not sought to corral and contain subjectivity within assertions of the relative objectivity of archivists. According to Ridener, Schellenberg discounted Jenkinson’s form-based archival selection as an inevitable source of “institutional bias” (p. 79). Subjective appraisal was both the means to avoid this bias and to increase the efficiency of archival operations in an era of accelerating information abundance (p. 94).

Schellenberg’s acceptance of subjectivity was consistent with the mid-twentieth-century “cult of the expert.” Ridener, who highlights social and cultural contexts while discussing archival theory, discusses the rising profile of science during the twentieth century. Like scientists, doctors, and other professionals who were perceived to “know best” within their professional domains, Schellenberg believed that archivists knew best when it came to archives, and that this expert knowledge justified their subjective opinions – indeed, Schellenberg seems to have believed that the breadth of perspective afforded by this professional expertise made their subjectivity something akin to objectivity.

Schellenberg’s endorsement of the mid-twentieth-century cult of the expert made appraisal theory, like science, academia, and other expert-dominated domains, ripe for postmodern criticism. Brien Brothman’s “Orders of Value” article of 1991 tore down archivists’ claims to any special or expert knowledge of what should or should not be saved, and introduced key postmodern concepts to archivy.¹ In Ridener’s opinion, postmodern archival thought allows

1 Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 78–100.

“more subjective criteria to become part of appraisal activities” (p. 136); this viewpoint, however, actually misconstrues postmodernism. It is not the goal of postmodernism to maximize subjectivity; rather, the intention is to demonstrate that maximal subjectivity is an inherent part of all human activity. In this sense, Jenkinson’s stringent definition of archives can no more limit subjectivity than Schellenberg’s embrace of expert subjectivity can deliver objectivity by the back door: both systems rely upon human judgment. The postmodernist response is neither to embrace pure relativism, nor to extol the virtues of subjectivity, but to document subjectivity, increase transparency of decisions, broaden the stakeholders involved in decision-making, and promote reproducibility of outcomes.

Ridener’s chapter on archival postmodernism is the weakest section of the book. In addition to misconstruing postmodernists as pro-subjectivity relativists, Ridener has based his analysis on a highly idiosyncratic selection of five archival theorists: Brien Brothman, Terry Cook, Carolyn Heald, Eric Ketelaar, and Heather MacNeil. This is not a bad starting point, but neither is it a complete or representative list. Ridener’s selection of articles, moreover, is predominantly from the 1990s, with a few from the early 2000s. It is thus based on the early days of archival postmodernism and at least five years out of date. Finally, given his interest in “archival theory as embodied in appraisal theory,” it is strange that Ridener cites only Cook’s work on postmodernism and fails to include any of Cook’s articles on macroappraisal.

Ridener’s book is based on research originally conducted for a thesis submitted to the San José State University School of Library and Information Science. It is in the arbitrariness of the limits of Ridener’s study that this pedigree shows most clearly. Defining archival theory as appraisal theory, limiting his historical scope to the Dutch *Manual* and after, and selecting five theorists to represent archival postmodernism – these are the kind of strategies that make a broad topic “doable” as a thesis, but they need to be intellectually justified to create a satisfying survey of archival thought.

From Polders to Postmodernism provides a welcome attempt to synthesize a century of thought on archival selection into a concise and coherent narrative. This is a well-written work, one that discusses archival theory in the context of general intellectual and cultural currents. Nonetheless, the audience for this book is not immediately apparent. The book is too limited – in length as much as in the artificial restrictions that Ridener imposes on his subject – to provide the complexity of analysis that will satisfy scholars of archival thought. It might serve as a general introduction to appraisal theory for a non-professional audience, should it fall into the right hands. Ridener’s work is perhaps most effective as a provocative survey of the period, an excellent means of stimulating discussion among archival studies students or archivists who have a working interest in appraisal theory. Archivy presently has many theorists and practitioners who are unafraid of asking big questions. Among

these, Ridener is a rare bird: he asks big questions and provides succinct, eminently readable answers.

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The Intimate Archive: Journeys Through Private Papers. MARYANNE DEVER, SALLY NEWMAN, and ANN VICKERY. Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2009. 198 p. ISBN 9780642276827.

The Intimate Archive: Journeys Through Private Papers charts the “journeys” of each of its authors through the archives of three modernist, Australian writers. Dever, Newman, and Vickery each contribute a chapter in which they discuss the character and peculiarities of their research subject’s archives, the relationships of the archives to the published writings and biographies of the authors, and their own experiences as researchers and academics working with archival material.

Marjorie Barnard (1897–1987), best known for the novels she co-authored with Flora Eldershaw under the pseudonym M. Barnard Eldershaw, is the subject of the chapter written by Maryanne Dever. Dever examines the effects on Barnard’s writing of her long-term but ultimately failed relationship with married fellow writer, Frank Dalby Davison. Barnard had published two novels with Eldershaw as well as a children’s book under her own name before meeting and becoming involved with Davison; however, it was the short story collection *The Persimmon Tree and Other Stories*, published soon after Barnard’s relationship with Davison ended, which, Dever explains, was recognized as her best work. Dever studies Barnard’s extant correspondence, focusing on her letters to close friends, in which Barnard discusses – whether explicitly or obliquely – her relationship with her married lover. To Dever these letters suggest that Barnard’s need to keep the relationship secret and the pain she felt at its demise in some way “fed her fiction” (p. 65), helping her to hone her short story writing skills. She further considers the way in which the stories Barnard wrote about failed relationships and adulterous affairs – about the “intimate experiences of loving, losing, humiliation and being alone” – might also “take the place of letters,” especially those letters Barnard felt she could not write to Davison himself after their affair had ended (p. 70, 71). The letters, then, function as “a nascent form of fiction” (p. 71), while at the same time, the short stories in *The Persimmon Tree* can be “interpreted as a muted ‘archive of feeling’” that “only becomes legible when read against the fragments of her correspondence” (p. 69, 70).

Ann Vickery’s chapter, entitled “Lesbia Harford’s Romantic Legacy,” focuses on the posthumous reputation of Harford (1891–1927), a writer who published only a very small number of poems prior to her death in 1927