When Running Made History

Roger Robinson
Canterbury University Press, 2019
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Defining a Discipline: Archival Research and Practice in the Twenty-First Century – Essays in Honor of Richard J. Cox

Jeannette A. Bastian & Elizabeth Yakel, editors
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When I was contacted by the Reviews Editor at the beginning of April and asked to review two books, I had conflicting emotions. The first related to the elephant stomping around in every room of my mind: the word Covid-19, an inescapable pachydermic earworm that muttered through every waking hour, making concentration patchy at best and non-urgent tasks very difficult to begin (and led to disturbingly mixed metaphors it seems). The second was a feeling of warmth – connection with the ARANZ community, and a feeling of purposefulness.

The two books reviewed here come from two more communities I've had the privilege to meet, and each highlights the significance of archives and recordkeeping for enabling communities to survive and thrive, to maintain their collective memories and

to build on their past, as well as to counter destructive narratives maintained by others with power over them. Both books also demonstrate by discussion and example that community archives come in a wide range of forms, intrinsic and unique to each community and its contexts, and bound up in community processes, places, interpretations, events and people.

The books foster reflection on evidence and accountability, ethics and memory. This is done overtly and by example in the book published by the SAA, a Festschrift for American archival academic, practitioner and teacher Richard Cox, while in Robinson's book it is intrinsic to the work itself, in the way he melds part of his own life story with sporting history and a history of social change.

Robinson's book describes the development of running as a sport. He is an insider who witnessed, attended or competed at events from amateur to the highest level of competition from the middle of the 20th century onwards. Robinson was a child at the post-WWII London Olympics of 1948, watched Peter Snell and Murray Halberg compete in Rome, and was a journalist reporting live at the Boston Marathon when the bomber struck in 2013. He was running in Berlin at the time of reunification, and in Central Park, New York the day the Twin Towers fell. His book ties together history, literature and autobiography, using his personal experience, oral and written testimony from his friends and published accounts to reflect on the development of the sport of running and its relationship with world events and wider social trends.

In this Robinson is uniquely placed, as a professor of English as well as a sports commentator with a deep knowledge and connections with a wide range of running insiders. Not least of these is his wife Kathrine Switzer, who herself made history by refusing to be ejected from the Boston Marathon in 1967 when women were not permitted to compete. Robinson's book does not use traditional institutional archives for sources, instead supplementing his own memories and published works with personal accounts and informal archives kept by members of the running community, and using as a finding aid his memory and relationships with other people.

The use of running as a sport to ruminate on societal racism, sexism and terrorism provides a surprisingly original, interesting and personal perspective. His thesis that running itself can not only reflect but also make history in a wider sense than simply creating "world records" is argued strongly in his chapter on the development and eventual acceptance of women's running, and in his discussion of the post-bombing 2014 Boston Marathon, where the victory by an American runner was seen as a redemptive act to overcome the terrorism of the year before and to reclaim the race. The act of holding and winning a race, and the creation and sharing of records about that act, intentionally worked together to help change a nation's mood. He quotes Barack Obama at the post-bombing memorial service: "…this time next year…the world will return… to run harder than ever, and cheer even louder, for the 118th Boston Marathon" (p.249).

The second book reviewed here was written to celebrate the career of Richard J. Cox, who retired from his 45-year archival career in the USA in 2017. Biographical notes in the introduction describe Cox's doctoral dissertation as (p.viii) "one of the first…that problematized the archives", examining the readiness of the archival profession to manage electronic records – "his intellectual focus on validating archives as its own distinct discipline." This focus continued throughout his career, and further, the standpoint of this book is identified when it states (p.x) "Cox has been a leader in promoting an understanding of the centrality of records to contemporary ethical and social justice concerns". Further, (p.ix) the essays "seek to carry his vision of an archival discipline and the transformational power of scholarship forward."

The book contains essays by fourteen archivists, setting out the current state of research in archival science, and discussing the themes around which the future direction is developing. Throughout his career, Cox read widely outside the archival discipline, bringing new insights that enriched his thinking, writing and teaching. The writers of these essays continue with this practice, connecting the archival discipline, its theories and practices to the wider world and its complex issues, showing how the world and the archival sphere are involved in a constant dance of influence and influencing.

Each essay could merit a review in itself, so varied and interesting are the issues they discuss, but here there is just space for a brief overview. The book is divided into four sections, covering themes on which Cox focused: accountability and evidence, ethics and education, archival history and memory. I have to admit to having my hackles raised initially by a book called "defining a discipline" which includes only perspectives of North America, but that said, the essays are wide-ranging in perspective. A strong connection between the essayists is their involvement with AERI, the Archival Education and Research Initiative, which began in the United States but involves archival educators and practitioners from around the world, holding annual gatherings that enable the sharing and debate of ideas.

This cross-pollination of theory is evident in several essays. For example, it was good to see the growing influence of records continuum theory beyond Australasia in a number of the essays – most directly, Anne Gilliland and Kathy Carbone's "Movement and Transformation: Teaching to the Fourth Dimension" but implicit in many others, including frequent use of the word "recordkeeping" in place of the more-often seen in North America unhyphenated record keeping.

In the first essay, David Wallace looks at the "limits and possibilities" of records as objects of accountability by considering the way records of US war crimes against Vietnamese civilians were and are still manipulated and controlled. Rather than "trustworthy mechanisms of accountability" the records exist within "deeper contexts of political power, organizational malfeasance, national remembrance, and military lionization […and…] contribute enduring false narratives that have been largely successful in writing these crimes out of history" (p.3).

Wallace's essay is just one in a series of compelling stories in this book, though as with any collection, some writers are easier to read than others. Throughout, the writers engage with the idea of agency in the archives, and with ongoing discussions about community engagement, the significance of archives both as witnesses and actors in events, whether minor, local or worldwide.

There is much reflection on memory and archives, and on oral

testimony, and the way a record of any type can have many and often conflicting meanings, and context is vital. For example, in Wendy Duff and Jefferson Sporn's essay on "The Question of Oral Testimony in the Archival Concept of Evidence", they observe "evidence in testimony is found in the relationships and contingencies surrounding and between a record and an event. Evidence is found not just in what is said but in ways in which the testimony emanates from the historical, institutional and mediating milieus that surround and contextualise it" (pp.30-31). Further, "by directly engaging the human elements of history, first person accounts burn through what Hartman calls the 'cold storage of history' and give texture to memory or to images that otherwise would have only sentimental or informational impact" (p.32). In recording oral testimony, Duff and Sporn describe the value of interviewee and witness creating knowledge together, "knowing with rather than knowing from". Viewers of oral testimony become secondary witnesses, taking responsibility for remembering into the future.

In "Carry it Forward", Caswell, Gabriola, Brilmyer and Zavala address Cox's discussion of the ethical aspects of accountability, interpreting accountability in terms of community-based archives. They describe archives as "instruments through which communities are simultaneously responsible to past and future generations" (pp.48-49).

The book as a whole is original, thought-provoking and sometimes surprising – for example, I had not realised Cox was a skilful amateur painter, and his landscape oil paintings appear both as the cover art and throughout the paperback, supplementing occasional photographs of archival contexts, providing a colourful and appealing side-light on his many interests.

I would recommend both books. As far as technical aspects go, both are well-edited, both are well-referenced, both have useful indexes and interesting illustrations, both are well set out, and the type-face is easy to read. I enjoyed reading both books, and am looking forward to reading them again. It is likely I will use both in my teaching and in helping me think further about the archival work I do.

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