

Engaging with Records and Archives: Histories and Theories

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When you turn to the contents page of this small and unassuming-looking volume, it is immediately clear that the essays inside are much more bold, imaginative and creative than its grey cover might suggest. The editors, all respected scholars now based in Canada (and formerly Europe), the US and Australia (formerly NZ), have gathered a thought-provoking and timely selection of papers. The book describes itself as “a multifaceted response to today’s growing fascination with the idea of the archive”, and the contributing authors provide a very wide range of well-informed perspectives on records and archives, from a range of communities, countries and disciplines. The source of the papers was the Seventh International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA 7), and the papers encompass reflections on records and archives theories and practice from the contemporary to the 19th century and earlier, from the perspectives of creators, custodians and users. Before I go on to review the book, I should provide a “Conflict of Interest” statement: one of the editors is one of my PhD supervisors. In our small field it is relatively common for reviewers to be familiar with some of the authors of the books they review, and the comments below are my genuine responses to the volume, but now you are at least aware of my possible bias.

The book considers the histories and theories of records and archives in terms of their relationship with broader culture. The editors assert that “*everyone*, not only archival specialists, would benefit from a deeper and better informed engagement with archival objects and practices as they become increasingly engrained in our daily lives, from the pervasiveness of archival materials on the web, to the use of archive-based knowledge in all sciences, to the uncertainty about the preservation of our digital memories that we may all experience sooner or later.”

Divided into two sections, the first, named “Rethinking Histories and Theories”, comprises five papers, challenging traditional concepts of the archival discourse by looking at their cultural and historical context and that of other disciplinary approaches. Jeannette Bastian discusses the

“archival turn” and suggests it is time archivists consider the broader view of archives discussed across the humanities. Juan Ilerberg compares 19th century archival science with other disciplines developing at the time such as geology, paleontology, linguistics and architecture, and finds connections which shed light on the source of foundational archival theories such as original order. Jonathan Furner then steps forward to the 1980s to look at the origins of data modelling practices in archival description, while Marlene Manoff considers archival silences, and calls for a broadening of the concept and engagement with other disciplines including scientists, artists, digital humanists, media studies scholars and historians to address these silences and bring the “interlocking social and material aspects of obscured systems” (p.77) into public consciousness. Finally in this section, Elizabeth Shepherd discusses the hidden voice of women in the archives: pioneering women archivists in early 20th-century England.

The second section, “Engaging Records and Archives”, looks at specific situated examples to illustrate the intersections between archival and recordkeeping practices and culture. Stefano Gardini’s paper, “The use and reuse of documents by chancellors, archivists and government members in an early modern state: Genoa’s *Giunta dei confini* and its archives” highlights the influence of the different communities interested in those archives over two centuries, particularly their influence on the structure of the finding aids. Next, Charles Juergens writes on access and secrecy in 19th century records in the Dutch East Indies, considering archives as instruments of power and examining the “dilemmas and inner debates of democracy” revealed by a study records management practices. Melanie Delva and Melissa Adams address some of the issues raised by the idea of “decolonising” the archives as an institution reflecting western world views, in their discussion of their own professional experiences negotiating agreements on access to records between the Anglican Church and an Indigenous community on Canada’s west coast. They call for the archival and recordkeeping communities to critically examine our theories, “in favour of actions which respect Indigenous ways of knowing and perspectives of recordkeeping” (p.148). Paul Lihoma, in his paper “History and development of information and recordkeeping in Malawi”, discusses the way different cultures, media and technologies have shaped one another, and their interaction with successive administrations, noting the damage that can be caused to recordkeeping by administrative changes. He also observes that archives can change in nature from instruments for oppression to instruments for

accountability, depending on their contexts. Next, Magdalena Wisniewska looks at community engagement with archives in Poland in terms of Pierre Nora's theory of decolonisation and democratisation of history, tracing the development of archival activism in Poland to the country's 20th century history of Nazi occupation followed by repression under the communist regime. Finally, Sian Vaughan reflects on artists' experience in the archives, looking at the way contemporary artists reframe archives through their practice, and suggesting their perspectives can challenge archivists to think about our practice and theories in new ways.

I found reading *Engaging with Records and Archives* itself an engaging experience, with its multiple voices and viewpoints providing many interesting and thought-provoking perspectives on our theories and practices. By placing these theories and practices into context, the multiple and diverse authors provided a useful basis for re-examining my own perspective from alternative points of view. The book is aimed at "scholars and practitioners, including archivists, records managers and other media and information professionals". I found the papers readable, and it is well-referenced, providing plenty of sources for further reading in any areas that you might find of particular interest. There is also a useful index. I would recommend this book both to practitioners and students.

Belinda Battley