

Preserving Our Heritage: Perspectives from Antiquity to the Digital Age [book review]

By: [Kathelene McCarty Smith](#)

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Abstract:

Some books are so significant that it is necessary to bring them to the attention of those who are unfamiliar with their relevance and to remind others why they should be an important part of their libraries. That is certainly the case with Preserving Our Heritage: Perspectives from Antiquity to the Digital Age, winner of the 2016 Preservation Publication Award from the Society of American Archivists (SAA). Seldom does a comprehensive anthology reflect such a breadth of information while remaining so accessible to students and professionals alike.

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Some books are so significant that it is necessary to bring them to the attention of those who are unfamiliar with their relevance and to remind others why they should be an important part of their libraries. That is certainly the case with Preserving Our Heritage: Perspectives from Antiquity to the Digital Age, winner of the 2016 Preservation Publication Award from the Society of American Archivists (SAA). Seldom does a comprehensive anthology reflect such a breadth of information while remaining so accessible to students and professionals alike.

Michele V. Cloonan, dean emerita and professor of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College, has drawn upon her vast expertise and recommendations from a diverse group of scholars and practitioners to assemble writings pertaining to the preservation of cultural heritage from 700 BCE to the 21st century. Short commentaries, poems, articles, and excerpts from a variety of sources give a well-rounded and thought-provoking view of preservation through the ages and demonstrate how scholars have

drawn on past sources to advance its philosophies and practices. Cloonan has focused on topics including preservation and cultural heritage, digitization, collection development, multicultural perspectives, and sustainability. Each of the eleven chapters has a commentary by Cloonan, in which she gives a short synopsis of what will be covered within the subsequent pages. This is followed by clearly defined “selections” supporting the topic of her chapter.

Cloonan begins the anthology with an extensive timeline that places the book and its writings within their chronological context. Commencing with Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah extolling the importance of saving documents, the timeline traces the evolution of thought regarding the preservation of texts, antiquities, and art; the importance of safeguarding material through contemporary methods; and more recent themes of digital preservation and “fair use.” Some of the entries are remarkable, such as Queen Elizabeth I of England’s issuance of a proclamation against defacing monuments (1560); John Murray’s account of his chemical analysis of paper (1829); and the suggestion by Canadian Reginald A. Fessenden that microform was a viable option for managing large quantities of documents (1896). This chronology puts the topic into perspective and gives the reader a sense of its variety and magnitude.

Cloonan initially focuses on classical writings which have formed the basis of current thought. Various perspectives are contributed by poets, social commentators, jurists, librarians, archivists, and scientific writers, each drawing on their own experiences, as well as from earlier resources. In addition to outlining the emergence of the initial impetus to preserve, Cloonan seeks to answer the important question: why preserve? Answers include religious reasons, political concerns, philosophical and scholarly interests, and personal rationales. She also traces early motivations to record and save important texts, as well as the growing interest in the preservation of art and architecture. This was reflected in the understanding that environmental and man-made damage could be prevented by measures such as designing buildings appropriate to their environment, limiting the use of candles in the same room as valued paintings, and ending the devastation of historic religious buildings such as the “Dissolution of the Monasteries,” an event which resulted in the pillaging of churches and monastic houses throughout England. The destruction of valuable material caused by war and other religious and political conflicts also caused growing concern with preserving antiquities.

The continued concern surrounding the protection of valued texts are echoed in librarian Gabriel Naude’s view of assembling collections and preserving them in libraries. He established his position in *Advice on Establishing a Library* (1727), in which he pondered the importance of developing collections and preserving them for research. Other writers contemplated different preservation options, such as Thomas Jefferson (1743- 1826), who asserted that creating multiple copies of documents would fight against “time and accident” that were damaging important public papers; John Murray (1786?- 1851), who was concerned about the poor quality of paper; and William Morris (1834- 1896), who celebrated the theory of “do no harm” when approaching the preservation of architectural buildings.

In subsequent chapters, Cloonan seeks to place preservation in context. She begins with a discussion of cultural heritage, exploring the term with the assistance of anthropologists,

archaeologists, and scholars. Culture is specifically defined as “socially constructed behavior and attitudes that are manifest in arts, beliefs, customs, and institutions” and heritage is described as “a perpetuation of culture—its historical scope and reach” (19). Preservation naturally follows as “assuring the longevity of cultural heritage” (19). These definitions lead the reader to place cultural heritage within the framework of “particular societies at particular times” (20). Cloonan continues the conversation regarding cultural memory through articles such as “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity” written by Jan Assmann. Assmann recalls earlier scholars who questioned whether collective memory is biological or cultural, but ultimately finds a solution to this question by his definition of cultural memory as “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (23). Cloonan selects works by other authors to continue to explore the idea of cultural heritage, describing it in philosophical, legal, and ethical perspectives.

Particularly interesting to educators and practitioners are the chapters concerning contextualizing preservation within libraries, archives, and museums. Cloonan chooses authors who describe the many roles that these collecting institutions play, including facilitating learning and conserving “the treasure of culture and identity.” The selected scholars question the roles of these institutions and mark their similarities and differences. They also tackle the definitions of preservation, restoration, and reconstruction. Additionally, Cloonan includes more practical writings which consider challenges such as how to start a preservation program, collection development and management, dealing with budgetary issues, monitoring preservation needs of large collections, and retention. These chapters slowly move the readers from questions regarding how items should be saved to pondering the question of should they be saved. Issues like space, cost, and digitization choices are weighed against what could be lost.

Cloonan devotes two chapters to current risks to cultural heritage and conservation. Although she covers the subject of cultural risk throughout the book, these chapters cover the real possibility of serious threats with practical suggestions regarding how they should be met, such as Peter Waters’ “Excerpts from revised text of ‘Procedures for Salvage of Water-Damaged Materials’” and Christopher Clarkson’s “Minimum Intervention in the Treatment of Books,” which both involve procedures and practices for handling actual disasters. Clarkson, who coined the phrase “book conservation” after the horrific 1966 Great Flood of Florence, gives specific examples of the analysis and repair of damaged books.

Subsequent chapters deal with preservation in the current digital environment. Interestingly, Cloonan includes articles dating to the late 1990s, which give the reader the opportunity to see the progression of opinions on the topic, such as what collections should be chosen for digitization, the nature of use, costs and benefits, and copyright concerns. The book is also comprised of articles written specifically for the text, including “Preservation in a Time of Transition: Refining Stewardship of Time-Based Media in the Digital Age” by Karen F. Gracy, which discusses the very immediate issues of how transition to digital formats has impacted archivists. Other sections deal more specifically with moving image material, sound and audio

archives, and audio and visual preservation. While this subject matter may seem very specific, it also reveals the importance of preserving this type of material to maintain our “cultural, linguistic, and ethnic” history.

Cloonan clearly states in the preface of her book that her aim is to “introduce students and professionals to readings that will help them in their studies and in their professional practice” (xv) and she does exactly that. The anthology’s format and chronological organization makes it an excellent reference and the readings can easily be integrated into classes across many disciplines. I often incorporate sections of *Preserving Our Heritage: Perspectives from Antiquity to the Digital Age* into my classes and I highly recommend it for students who are becoming familiar with the subject, as well as professionals who value having a variety of excellent writings about cultural preservation at their fingertips.