What Are Archives? Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives: A Reader [book review]

By: Noah Lenstra

Abstract:

In the preface to What Are Archives? Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives: A Reader, Louise Craven, head of cataloging at the National Archives, United Kingdom, argues that archivists need to abandon their insular self-perception and "adopt a wider perspective: looking at archives from the outside, rather than the inside." To implement this new research agenda, Craven and members of the British Society of Archivists brought together scholars from multiple disciplines in 2006 around the question: "what are archives?" The resulting essays, loosely revised for this volume, demonstrate that much valuable commentary on archival theory and practice can emerge when archives and archivists are seen in relation to other academic disciplines and in relation to other information professions.

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Article:

***Note: Full text of article below

What Are Archives? Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives: A Reader. Ed. Louise Craven. Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. $114.95. 196 pp. Hardcover.

In the preface to *What Are Archives? Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives: A Reader*, Louise Craven, head of cataloging at the National Archives, United Kingdom, argues that archivists need to abandon their insular self-perception and "adopt a wider perspective: looking at archives from the outside, rather than the inside." To implement this new research agenda, Craven and members of the British Society of Archivists brought together scholars from multiple disciplines in 2006 around the question: "what are archives?" The resulting essays, loosely revised for this volume, demonstrate that much valuable commentary on archival theory and practice can emerge when archives and archivists are seen in relation to other academic disciplines and in relation to other information professions.

Dialogue is a persistent theme across the book and was also presumably critical to the success of the day-session that led to this publication. Rather than provide conclusive answers to the question of what archives are, the authors instead offer brief snapshots of how the question could be approached from different disciplines, with different methodologies. Such a project invites debate. It is unfortunate that Craven did not complement the print publication with a virtual forum in which readers could discuss the tantalizing issues raised by the book's contributors.

Despite this design limitation, the authors' rich citations are one of the book's most valuable elements. Since each author approaches his or her essay with different perspectives on what are archives, their citations offer glimpses into how different communities perceive archives in different ways. From an American perspective, simply reading how British archivists see themselves offers valuable insights. For example, numerous authors in the book point out that the success of the BBC's *Who Do You Think You Are*? has made "archives" "a household word" in the United Kingdom. Based on such an insight, one could ask what cultural and popular influences impact how American users perceive the archival profession.

Unfortunately, the volume lacks any sustained analysis of popular conceptualizations of archives. Focusing more on *theoretical* perspectives than on *cultural* perspectives, each of the book's contributors views archives through a particular disciplinary lens, which is valuable in considering how different academics understand archives but does not begin to address the important issue of how the general public sees archives and archivists. Even in considerations of community archives, the authors seem more engaged in disciplinary debates than in engaging the general public in a conversation about what archives are and the roles they play in society.

Much more important for many of the authors of this volume is the question of how archives have been positioned throughout time within a cultural heritage environment that includes libraries and museums. Andrew Prescott uses postmodern theory to analyze the preoccupations of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the progenitor of British archival theory. Prescott argues that anxieties about archivists' place within the heritage sector have existed since the very founding of the archival profession, inspiring us to see contemporary professional divides and tensions in a new, historically grounded light. Later in the book, Caroline Williams reinterprets the difference between manuscripts

and archives from a British perspective. Finally, Gerald P. Collins examines how the historical division between archives and museums has in some cases been made problematic by the diffusion of digital technology.

A final theme that permeates the book is the consideration of how archival practice and theory need to adapt in a networked society. Andrew Flinn examines how the activities of international antiglobalization activists stress traditional archival wisdom, since they use highly transient Web 2.0 technologies to mobilize globally. He laments that "any archival trace" of unorthodox protest movements from as recently as 2005 "have probably already largely disappeared." Perhaps in response to this problem, Jane Stevenson argues that in order to respond to technological changes in the way records are produced, the archival profession needs to proactively attract individuals with strong technological backgrounds. She worries that without this competency "wired" into the profession, individuals without archival training will begin assuming more and more responsibility over archival records, ultimately leaving archivists with very little power or control over how their archives are managed. Craven worries that the process has already begun, with too much of modern records retention having shifted "to technical colleagues" working without any archival oversight.

An example of the integration of technology and archival theory can be found in Andrea Johnson's essay. Adapted from her dissertation in computer science, Johnson's essay reports on research into the behaviors of digital archives users. Drawing on a number of schools of thought, including ethnography, human-computer interaction, and archival theory, her rich description of how users approach and interact with virtual archives showcases how interdisciplinary research into archival practice has the potential to positively affect future professional developments.

At the end of *What Are Archives?* one is left with the sensation that the contemporary archivist's theoretical and practical toolbox must be enormous in order to address all the issues raised by these authors. However, a more positive interpretation is that the numerous competing conceptualizations of archives floating around within the academy and among the general public indicates the continued societal relevance of archives. The final message is that archivists do not need to provide the final word on what archives are. Rather, archivists need to enter the ongoing conversations to make sure their perspectives and insights are heard and remain relevant.

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