

Archives and Archivists in 20th Century England [book review]

By: [Noah Lenstra](#)

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Abstract:

How do we understand the history of the archival profession? This question grounds Elizabeth Shepherd's analysis of archives and archivists in England. Shepherd's comprehensive survey is packed full of information, yet is approachable by the American archivist completely unfamiliar with the history of archives and archivists in England. Indeed, one of the main points of the book is to showcase to an international audience the "English" voice in international archival history. A second focus of the book is to encourage modern English archivists to reflect upon the often quite messy and disconnected history of their profession in order to come together as a cohesive community in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: book review | archives | archivists

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Archives and Archivists in 20th Century England. By Elizabeth Shepherd. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009. 245 pp. Bibliography, index. Hardcover. \$114.95.

How do we understand the history of the archival profession? This question grounds Elizabeth Shepherd's analysis of archives and archivists in England. Shepherd's comprehensive survey is packed full of information, yet is approachable by the American archivist completely unfamiliar with the history of archives and archivists in England. Indeed, one of the main points of the book is to showcase to an international audience the "English" voice in international archival history. A second focus of the book is to encourage modern English archivists to reflect upon the often quite messy and disconnected history of their profession in order to come together as a cohesive community in the twenty-first century.

The book is organized into four sections that cover, respectively, the history of policy in relation to archives, the history of archival institutions, the history of professional associations, and the history of archival education. Each section could be read individually, but together they offer a comprehensive survey of the English archival profession worthy of being emulated in other parts of the world.

Of special interest is Shepherd's analysis of Sir Hilary Jenkinson, who has an unimpeachable role in the history of modern archival theory. Yet, when Shepherd compares Jenkinson as theorist to Jenkinson as archivist, she notes that during his tenure at the Public Record Office he effectively blocked all efforts to modernize the archives to address contemporary documentation and records management issues, which remained unresolved until his retirement in 1954. More generally, Shepherd shows how a handful of forceful movers and shakers dramatically shaped the development of the archives profession throughout the twentieth century.

Shepherd's contextualization of archives and archivists throughout the book primarily is organized around policy issues and broad-scale trends within the archival profession. For example, she explores the interactions between archivists and an increasingly large and important "heritage sector" within England's economy in the second half of the twentieth century. Shepherd argues that archivists were unprepared to respond to this nascent sector, and, as a result, lost out on much available funding until 2000, when the National Council on Archives appointed and paid someone to help archivists survive and thrive within this new terrain. This brief example represents just one of the intriguing nuggets spread through Shepherd's text, which can and should prompt much reflection on the history of our own professional community over the last century.

Despite the book's seeming comprehensiveness, however, there are, for this reader, some glaring gaps and absences. Most importantly, Shepherd almost completely elides the history of British Imperialism and the role of imperialism in shaping the archival profession. Much more could be said on this issue, with Shepherd merely hinting at the impact of archivists in commonwealth countries looking to England for archival education, and the formerly colonized coming to the metropole seeking records to prove their British citizenship following the end of the Empire. These allusions imply a much more globalized, transnational archival profession than Shepherd seems prepared to address.

Nonetheless, it is hard to fault Shepherd since she has included so much information in her book, drawing especially on the archives of various British professional associations, as well as the university archives of multiple schools offering archival education throughout the twentieth century. Shepherd, a current faculty member in the Information Studies Program, University College London, is especially interested in the role of education in shaping the profession.

Any individual interested in aspects of British archival history definitely should add this important volume to their collection. The book is also of value for any American archivist seeking to compare our profession to one with a very different historical trajectory. For those not sure if this volume is for them, it is worth reading Shepherd's 2009 article in *Archival Science*, "Culture and evidence: or what good are the archives? Archives and archivists in 20th century England," which touches on some, but by no means all, of the issues addressed in the book.

Noah Lenstra
Certificate of Advanced Study (C.A.S.) Student
Graduate School of Library and Information Science
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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