

knowledge, or it can be used to refresh existing plans. Students would also find this a very useful text. While following a more traditional approach to plan layout, it consistently reinforces the message that plans need to be specific to individual organisations and their resources. A plan is only useful if it is current, supported by senior management, fits the individual organisation's needs and if staff are committed, familiar with the plan and trained in its use.

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Queensland State Archives

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Elizabeth H Dow, *Archivists, Collectors, Dealers and Replevin: Case Studies in Private Ownership of Public Documents*, Plymouth, Scarecrow Press, 2012. xvi + 128 pp. ISBN 978-0-8108-8377-2. £39.95

The medieval French term 'replevin' is little used by Australian lawyers, let alone by Australian archivists. It means a legal action in which the plaintiff claims that something is held illegally by the defendant and should be restored to the ownership of the plaintiff. In America, the term is often used to describe attempts by government archivists to recover documents that they claim are public records, but which are currently in the possession of private individuals or organisations. In some instances, they were stolen from the archives. More commonly, they were retained by officials after retirement or they passed out of official custody long before the archives even existed. The present owners may have inherited them or purchased them from dealers or at auctions, sometimes for very high prices.

Elizabeth Dow is an American archivist and academic and the wife of David Chesnutt, who, for decades, has been a leading figure in the Manuscript Society. As one archivist rather unkindly asked her: 'Sort of like marrying the Mafia, right?' (p. viii). Her strong awareness of the mutual distrust and animosity that exists between many private collectors and government archivists led her to write this book. The cover illustration shows two buffaloes with their horns locked in combat, presumably representing a collector and an archivist. The text, however, does not match the cover, as it is singularly lacking in drama. There are no stories of zealous archivists, campaigning lawyers, unscrupulous dealers, vulnerable widows and well-heeled collectors. Instead, Dow seeks to explain, in an even-handed way, the many factors that cause misunderstandings and conflict between collectors and archivists and which sometimes end in litigation. They include difficulties in defining the phrase 'public records', the variant archival legislation in the 50 states and variant policies adopted in the state archives, the long history of recordkeeping and private collecting in America and the relatively recent establishment of most government archives, the problems facing understaffed archives in bringing vast quantities of records under adequate security and intellectual control, the thriving market in documents of all kinds and the pride and passion of collectors.

Dow refers briefly to public records held in the collections of long-established libraries and historical societies. In general, however, her interest is in public records owned by private individuals and bought and sold by collectors. In Australia, some archival records are purchased by institutions, but a public market is almost non-existent. The situation in America is totally different, with many dealers

specialising in documents, regular auctions devoted to manuscripts and thousands of serious collectors. There are no total figures for private transactions, but the auction market for rare American documents totals US\$30 million to US\$50 million annually. Single items can fetch astonishing sums. In 2009, a letter penned by George Washington was sold for US\$3.2 million. In 2011, the prices of single presidential letters ranged from US\$3978 (Reagan) to US\$31,025 (Jefferson) and US\$68,500 (Lincoln). With so much money involved, the threatened removal of particular documents from private ownership is bound to arouse strong feelings. Another contrast between Australia and America is the large number of jurisdictions in America and the long time that they took to create official archives. Some state administrations go back to the seventeenth century, whereas many state archives were only established in the mid-twentieth century. The United States Government dates from 1789, but the National Archives was only founded in 1934. Throughout America, there were long periods in which public records were in the custody of irresponsible or negligent officials. Thus, items were frequently lost, carelessly discarded or even stolen.

The subtitle of the book is misleading. Dow refers to only one replevin court case (in North Carolina in 1975), and, while implying that replevin actions are quite common, she studiously avoids naming specific cases, collectors, dealers, archivists or the actual documents that were in dispute. There is one chapter on case studies, which is the central chapter of the book, but the 17 cases that are summarised are all imaginary. It is an effective way of showing the uncertainties and variables that face a government archivist in deciding whether or not to pursue an official estray. Factors range from the provenance of the document, the definition of public records (is a letter written by a president official or is it private? Is a marriage licence a public record?), legislative provisions (are copies acceptable? Should the owner be compensated?), the reputation of the dealer and the attitudes of the state's legal officers.

This book is entirely focused on the United States, and archivists in other countries may consider the subject matter to be somewhat esoteric. They may, however, be interested in the author's potted histories of official American recordkeeping, the efforts of bodies to preserve and publish records, the creation of state archives and the National Archives and the organisation of the archival profession in America. In a slim book, Dow tries to cover too much territory; for instance, the brief section on record appraisal is superficial and unnecessary. If she had omitted some of the background material and instead introduced a few actual collectors and archivists involved in replevin cases, the book would have been more lively and appealed to a wider audience.

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Gideon Haigh, *The Office: A Hardworking History*, Melbourne, The Miegunyah Press, 2012. viii + 609 pp. ISBN 978 0 5228 556 2. AU\$45.00

It would be easy to become sidetracked while assessing *The Office; A Hardworking History*. I have often imagined an U3A introduction to archives course based entirely on literary sources, and here, beginning its massive bibliography, *The Office* lists 200 novels and plays with office settings, followed later by the titles of over a hundred films and TV shows. But I digress.