

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.

Although the book under discussion spans so much material, this review needs to explain its relevance to archives and recordkeeping. Its Australian author Gideon Haigh operated with a very broad idea of his subject. For information and insights, he has drawn widely from architecture, biography, political science, management, social psychology, sociology, public administration, business history and technology. In addition, he has trawled a vast number of newspaper reports, novels, transcripts and stills from films and television series. When one considers that he is a prolific sports writer and commentator known for strong opinions and meticulous research and has a second established speciality as a business writer and journalist, this unexpected work – his twenty-fifth book – is truly remarkable.

Under the broad topic of ‘the office’, Haigh traverses the history of Western bureaucracy and management, organising his material into two halves – the story of the office (see chapters 1–10) and the life of the office (see chapters 11–20). Each chapter is further divided by illustrations, box quotes and subheadings. It is easy to read and digest.

As to what the chapters are trying to say, they seem more like Stephen Fry’s endless series of *QI* than a sequence of arguments and evidence marshalled in support of a thesis. Japanese salarymen, work cloths, skyscrapers, computers, typewriters and retrenchment – all and more are covered. Curious about sex, romance and the office? Turn to chapter 16. Helping with an assignment on the push-button office, from air-conditioning to personal computers? See chapter 9. While not prosecuting a case, however, Haigh does acknowledge that the office has been a site of constant change – occupational, architectural, technological, social, economic and a myriad of others. In summary, to me, its 600 pages of varied and interesting content dotted with strangely intriguing trivia feels like the rejigged contents of an encyclopaedia.

Two product warnings should be noted. The book’s examples and settings are from the United Kingdom (UK) and, especially, the United States (US); there is, unfortunately, almost no mention of Australia. Yet through its repeated film and literary references, it remains culturally familiar. Next, though he has written business histories (for example, *Asbestos House: The Secret History of James Hardie Industries*), clearly Haigh is not the Australian profession’s latter day JoAnne Yates, whose writing on internal communication systems in business in the 1980s was so important to North American archival discourse. Nevertheless, throughout the book, there are passing mentions of records in various guises – for example, an early aside made while discussing ancient Egypt seeing recordkeeping and copying as two timeless clerical functions. These are quite un-self-conscious and are presented as an inevitable and unremarkable by-product or object of administrative processes, office equipment, technology, efficiency studies and work roles.

Whether you should read *The Office* depends on your attitude to the following questions. Can it really significantly help researchers to know the office and organisational environment in which the document they are consulting was prepared and the technology that was used to communicate the original and produce and store the official copy? Is this part of the archivist’s core role to research and provide this detail or is it just for when you get a moment? And what scope and depth limits should apply to the pursuit of this special information?

Traditionally, the context of records and recordkeeping systems was sketched in by documenting things like record series, the person or entity which created them, their function and basis of authority and a larger overarching organisation or social unit. According to the current 2008 edition of *Keeping Archives*, context is the knowledge necessary to sustain a record’s meaning or evidential value. Context, it stated, describes

the ‘who, what, when, where and why’ of records creation and management. Similarly, the National Archives of Australia’s *CRS Manual* states that respect for provenance is based on the belief that records can only be properly understood if the administrative context in which they were created, maintained and used is known.¹ Note the emphasis: *only be properly understood*.

Given that context is important, logically, if paradoxically, any given context has a wider context. Those dissatisfied with simple explanations will inquire about the wider societal and historical contexts of records’ narrow administrative context; they know what richly sustains a record’s meaning and will reject superficial answers to the ‘why’ of records creation. Quite soon, they are reading the emerging literature of paperwork studies and attending gatherings of the Intentional Conference of the History of Archives and Records. There are even good relevant Australian titles for them to consider, such as Ian Batterham’s *The Office Copying Revolution* (2008),² Jane Gleeson-White’s *Double Entry* (2011)³ and, for its fascinating and sprawling information and entertainment, Gideon Haigh’s *The Office*, too.

Endnotes

1. National Archives of Australia, *CRS Manual*, December 1999 at <http://naa12.naa.gov.au/manual/Introduction/CRSIntroduction.htm>
2. Ian Batterham, *The Office Copying Revolution; History, Identification and Revolution*, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 2008.
3. Jane Gleeson-White, *Double Entry: How the Merchants of Venice Shaped the Modern World - and How Their Invention Could Make or ?Break the Planet*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2011.

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