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REVIEWS

Richard J Cox, *Archival Anxiety and the Vocational Calling*, Litwin Books, Duluth, Minnesota, 2010. xiv + 374 pp. ISBN 978 1 936117 49 9 (paperback). US$35.00.

Richard J Cox is a very familiar name within the archival profession. Author of over 15 books, hundreds of articles and lead archival educator at the University of Pittsburgh, Cox has earned the respect of the national and international archival community over a career that has encompassed the full range of archival endeavours. In *Archival Anxiety and the Vocational Calling*, Cox reflects on his own career, both as a practitioner and an educator, as he revisits and reconsiders issues that he feels are of crucial concern to the archival community. Importantly, he ponders at length on what it means to be an archivist.

Known for his provocative thinking, as well as his ability to galvanise a post-lunch sleepy conference session into an impassioned debate, Cox is equally well-known for his unequivocal commitment to graduate archival education, his mentorship of generations of students and his thoughtful and forward-thinking teaching and writing. An archivist's archivist, Cox sees the world through the lens of records and urges us to do likewise.

At the centre of this book is the notion of an 'archival calling'. How and why do people become archivists? What does it mean to be an archivist? And what are an archivist's obligations and responsibilities? Cox initially explores these themes by inviting us to follow his own personal odyssey – how and why he became an archivist. And it is an intriguing journey, one that begins at Colonial Williamsburg in Williamsburg, Virginia – the restored first capitol of the American colonies, which is now a living history museum – where he was first taken as a boy on a family outing. Colonial Williamsburg has remained a central motif for Cox, as the continuing site of both personal and archival events. Appropriately, that journey has come full circle, through his current research on the extensive diaries of Lester Cappon, discovered by Cox in the archives of the College of William and Mary. Cappon, in addition to being the archivist for Colonial Williamsburg, was also Director of the Institute of Early American History and Culture located there.

In chapters 1 through 3, Cox sets up the underlying themes of the book, as he explores the idea of an archival calling, looking at the variety of ways that archivists find that calling – through mentoring, through their work and through their education. Importantly (and fully in the Cox tradition), he immediately challenges archivists to become activists, as he observes that having a strong sense of mission should go beyond a personal sense of identity, and affect and influence the roles that archivists assume within organisations. He writes:

> Holding a strong sense of personal mission, especially one with ideas of the accountability function of records, also can place archivists and records managers in very

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> different roles within their organizations and society, roles requiring them sometimes to speak out or even place their jobs and careers in jeopardy (p. 14).

It is clear that he, himself, strongly identifies with that mission.

The autobiographical nature of the first three chapters forms a compelling entrée into this book. They offer an intriguing and useful glimpse into the motivations and personal story of an individual who deliberately chose a particular career and has spent his adult life in passionate engagement with it. While there is a profusion of literature written about archives, there is relatively little written about archivists. Few archivists writing about archives elect to do so in a personal way. When they do, it not only engages us immediately, but illustrates what many archivists may already feel – that, for an archivist, the professional is also the personal.

In the remaining nine chapters, Cox primarily addresses the anxiety portion of his title. Each chapter deals with an area that has concerned him for many years and that he has discussed in other venues. A cynic might feel that these are merely issues warmed over and served up again for this book, but that would be shortsighted. While each of these chapters deal with topics that we associate with Cox's writings, these are also the central concerns that he has thought about, developed and honed over a lifetime. Full of insights and nuggets of information, these essays revolve around the issues that make up his archival calling. Cox, himself, addresses the rationale for collecting and adapting this material into one volume, when he writes, 'I believe that assembling them into one volume provides a glimpse into why archivists have so many reasons to be anxious about the state of their profession and its mission' (p. xiv). Citing the major reason for this anxiety as the growing societal recognition of the centrality of records and recordkeeping and the consequent need for archivists to look far beyond their traditional comfort zone, he concludes that 'archival anxiety may be the result of this community being shaken out of its complacency' (p. xiv).

Chapters 4 through 6 focus on government records and government secrecy. Cox brings his extensive reading, as well as his encyclopaedic knowledge of records in the United States, to bear on a wide-ranging discussion, running the gamut from presidential libraries to the prison records of Nelson Mandela to record reclassification at the National Archives of the United States. This discussion of government secrecy and archival responsibilities segues naturally into ethics in chapter 7.

Ethics and accountability are perhaps the two words that many people who are familiar with Cox's writing and teaching immediately associate with him. In this chapter, he gives a succinct history of the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) development of a code of ethics and then goes on to discuss how this code, and ethics codes in general, stand up in a corporate records' world, as well as a government one. His own take on ethics is simple and straightforward. He writes:

> When I discuss ethical practice or concerns, I mean choosing right over wrong, recognizing that we can often debate the nuances of what might be right or wrong but that we cannot ignore such aspects in our work (p. 132).

He exhorts archivists to look beyond codes of ethics to consider their own ethical roles within the institutions in which they work.

Chapters 8 through 10 focus on relatively recent issues within the American archival profession. At least two of these issues were not only contentious, but Cox himself helped to lead the charge. In 1997, SAA announced an executive decision to destroy the archives of its own Archives and Archivists Listserv. The ensuing controversy and eventual reversal of this decision, detailed in chapter 8, create an instructive case study that not only concerns professional identity, but also engages issues of appraisal and ethics. A similar, but more external, professional case in chapter 9 recounts the travails of a researcher on Presidential Libraries – Anthony Clark – who, when denied access to materials at the National Archives of the United States, appealed to SAA for assistance on the grounds of their code of ethics. In chapter 10, Cox takes on the archival finding aid, urging archivists to think ever more deeply about the stories they are telling.

In the final three chapters, Cox resumes the more personal tone of the first three, as he focuses on the themes at the centre of his own archival calling. The responsibilities of educators in this age of archival anxiety, the challenges of appraisal in a shifting landscape of history and memory and an ever-present sense of ethics all lead Cox to what may well be a prime motivator of his entire career, as well as for this book, namely, 'substantially moving the archival profession from a passive cultural discipline to one that stands at the center of our society's concern for accurate information' (p. 253). In his conclusion, he joins both calling and anxiety as he writes: 'We live in difficult times, and being successful requires more effort and a tough-mindedness that many never anticipated when they responded to a call to enter the field' (p. 259).

Written with humour and an engaging style, the variety and range of issues in this book and their analysis by one of the most prominent writers and thinkers in the archival profession today are all reasons to read it. At times, a very personal journey; at times, controversial and argumentative, in *Archival Anxiety and the Vocational Calling*, Richard Cox rides his hobby horses, but also shows us excellent reasons why all archivists need to join him on that ride.

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James Gleick, *The Information: A History, a Theory, a Flood*, Fourth Estate, London, 2011. 544 pp. ISBN 978 1 4000 9623 7. AUD$30.00.

This wide-ranging survey of the history and development of the concept of information is an elegant, engaging and, I think, successful example of one of its main theses: we need (and need to be) intelligent curators, synthesisers and thinkers, in order to search, sift, filter, cross reference and distil meaning from the ever-increasing volumes of information coming from an ever-increasing number of disparate data sources.

A delight of this book is its wonderful range of material. We travel back and forth in time, while Gleick teases out his themes, the continuities and disjunctions, as the world becomes more connected and the flow of information becomes a flood, a deluge, a glut.