

THE ROAD TO TRUTH IS PAVED WITH GOOD ACCESSIONS

The following dialogue arises out of a paper entitled "The historian and his manuscript sources" given by Dr. Michael Roe, Lecturer in History at the University of Tasmania, at the recent Library Association Conference in Hobart (August, 1963). The questions put to Dr. Roe in this article were devised by Gerald Fischer and his staff at the South Australian Archives. The answers represent in many cases a development of the ideas expressed in Dr. Roe's original paper, which is published in the volume of Conference proceedings.

DIALOGUE

Question 1 : Given "that archival records fructify best in their place of origin" what should be the attitude of Australian State archives towards bodies wishing to establish local and regional archives? Are there any standards and resources and degrees of demand that you would regard as minimal for the setting up of such local archives?

Answer : This question implies an apprehension lest the division of records among their respective places of origin render them less valuable. Small archives might lack the technical know-how to organise and preserve their holdings ; subject to local pressures, their officers might be excessively scrupulous in allowing free use of documents. An historian attempting to survey a large geographical area would have to travel very extensively. In consequence, the study of history might become increasingly parochial and timid.

I recognize the force of this apprehension. There are, surely, minimal standards : no archive should be created anywhere unless it is able to promise the physical survival of objects in its care, and the provision at least of an accessions list. I would not insist on a minimum of demand, however. An archive I see as a public amenity, like a museum or even a swimming pool : to establish one when no demand existed would, in its way, be all the more creditable than when the public clamoured for the move. It is not very likely that an establishment would occur in such a void, but certainly I see not objection to the principle.

My chief argument in rebuttal of your apprehension is rather different, however: namely, that most dangers you suggest would disappear if the new archives gathered material uniquely local in its nature. This would include first public records — lands office, court-house and police, municipal administration, hospital board, and so on. But greater attention might be paid to institutions of social activity — progress associations, parents' clubs, sports' teams, and church groups. Business records would provide another field for enterprise. Above all, the collection of personal reminiscences, especially by verbal recording, demands the supervision of someone who has local knowledge and sympathy.

Overall then, I feel that central and local archives need waste little energy squabbling over already-located documents, for they can all act effectively in amassing new ones. Yet I don't want to shirk the full implications of your question. If there should be a dispute as to the deposit of a particular item, then my support would tend to be for the local institution. The dangers you apprehend do exist, but I believe that they matter less than the argument of my original proposition—documents do mean more if seen and studied against the background of their place of origin.

Question 2 : Should the archivist vary conditions of access for the same material according to any appraisal he may make of the inquirer's likely use of it, or should material made available on one occasion be available to all subsequent inquirers regardless of status and likely use they may make of it?

Answer : This issue aroused most controversy in the discussion of my paper at Conference. Some felt that for the archivist to exercise such discrimination would be to assume "God" powers to which no-one has rightful claim. It's a question archivists themselves must determine, rather than for an outsider to pontificate upon. But my own position would now be that the archivist should so discriminate. He should, because he must : can any archivist claim that the exigencies of his office have not at some time forced such a choice upon him?

If the answer to that question is "no", then the next one is "what criteria should the archivist use in making his discrimination?" Here again Conference provided some provocative moments, the most forthright answer being "the convenience of the depositor (in this case, a government) of my archives". Most of you, I imagine, would disagree, and seek some other formula. "That the researcher is acting in good faith" is a form of words which comes easily to the tongue. But it solves few problems. Acting under it, somebody might feel justified in refusing a Marxist (or Protestant, or conservative) access, because he bears malice against capitalists (or Catholics, or radicals). Perhaps, instead, the archivist should seek out and disqualify not bad faith, but the seeking of practical gain? But the most dedicated academic might hope that his projected study will win him promotion, and I see nothing wrong with this, nor the composition of historical articles for the popular press.

Every formula would provoke such objections as these, I believe, and so the conclusion must be that no formula will suffice. I would like archivists to consider that their chief purpose was to assist in the production of good historical literature (I define this in the last answer), but even should this be accepted it is vague and far from a *total* definition of an archivist's role. So my ultimate answer would be that you must make decisions concerning availability simply on your reaction to every case as it comes before you. One of the distinctions between a good and a bad archivist will be that the former makes decisions which entail less injustice and ill-feeling. All this is vague and subjective, but such is the nature of most significant tasks.

Question 3 : Would you agree that, while general historical trends might be as well interpreted from printed parliamentary papers and secondary sources, that, nevertheless, original manuscripts provide the best opportunity, in the final analysis, for establishing the truth of certain *facts*; and that if the facts on which some published works are based can be shown to be wrong, that there is good reason for a little more adoration of manuscripts?

Answer : In a word, yes. Manuscripts of course can help in establishing facts. My criticism was of the attitude that any statement expressed in manuscript was intrinsically more likely to be true and/or valuable than one expressed in any other form. Alternatively, it might be argued, one could at least work out a schedule of types of facts which have this extra-quality when embedded in manuscript. But on further thought I doubt even this. Thus one would be tempted, in constructing such a schedule, to assume that a man would be more likely to tell the truth about himself in manuscript letters. Yet would he? Suppose A has said in open court "I am degenerate", and in a letter "I am normal"; while B has said in open court "I am normal", and in a letter "I am degenerate".

What are we likely to believe about each? Answer : that both are degenerate. Our working rule is that both are more likely to speak the truth when saying something to their disadvantage, irrespective of the medium of expression.

Manuscripts are, in the nature of things, more likely than any other source, to provide facts concerning certain subjects—domestic life, travel movements, reading habits. But even here, the claim to particular value as against other sources (should they exist) does not hold good.

Question 4 : Would you agree that a source is important for the information it contains, and that where the same material is available in both manuscript and printed form, the two are complementary. Any variations may be a valuable indication of a modification of opinion. The original statement has the value of spontaneity and is possibly more candid. It is not necessarily more authentic. If originality is a criterion, which is the original in the case of a lecture read from a manuscript: the manuscript or the recording of the author's voice reading it?

Answer : This runs directly from my last answer, and chimes with it. One of the most fruitful enquiries for historians to follow is the significance of divergencies in statement concerning or by his subject; but again that these divergencies should appear in manuscript has no particular importance. I find strange your distinction between "candid" and "authentic" : to me the two are virtually synonymous.

Are you right in assuming that a spontaneous statement is more likely to be candid than not? It's a psychologist's subject, but I suspect that some people tend to be truthful, others deceitful, in spontaneity; and further that each individual varies in this particular according to the nature of his involvement with the subject concerned.

The point of your last sentence is, presumably, to stress the difficulty of claiming that any record is original; and so the absurdity of claiming that an original record has some intrinsic truth-value.

Question 5 : (Rather an omnibus one). Is there a danger that in releasing government records too quickly after their creation that they will be used for what might be termed "historical journalism", i.e., articles which are critical of the government of the day, or for some other political advantage? Would you advocate any form of conditional access to avoid this danger? As an historian, at what period after their creation do you think government records could be opened up, or should be opened up? Do you see any further danger that the archival profession might become immersed in current records management in order to make recent records available, and will thus neglect the work of listing and arranging older material? And do you consider this older material (say over 50 years) is the more legitimate and traditional sphere of activity for the historian? Bearing in mind the axiom that a writer can be too close to events to discuss them objectively or unemotionally, are yesterday's events equally the historian's sphere of activity as those of fifty years ago?

Answer : After Conference discussion and further thought I would now modify my original position to accord with the assumptions behind this question. To clarify my attitude I will have to define my view of historical study. It has many facets, but for the present purpose three points require emphasis :

1. The historian studies the past for its own sake; not to draw lessons concerning the present or future, still less to provide propaganda for any sect or faction in an immediate situation. As part of this approach, the historian takes unto himself the sympathies and attitudes of past people, rather than judges them by present standards.

2. Nevertheless the historian is a man of the present and knows something of what has happened since the period of his study. These circumstances inevitably will affect him: they may determine the question he seeks to answer — why did this movement fail and that succeed, why has the reputation of this man always remained high while that stays forgotten? Thus the historian has a stereoscopic view of his subject: he is a man of the present seeking to absorb himself into the past. This stereoscopic element is perhaps the most vital element in true historical study.

3. The historian will always strive to discover as much as he possibly can about his subject, but he realises a limit must apply at some point. I would even say that “history” cannot and should not claim to tell the truth about the past, but only to hypothecate the truth *as it appears from the documents available* — however many, however few.

This definition determines my answer to your question. First, it suggests that were all records made immediately available some person would be tempted to write so-called “contemporary history”. My definition rules out the possibility of such a subject existing; if an issue is contemporary, its investigation cannot have the stereoscopic vision which I regard as essential to history. So as an historian I would agree that the archivist’s higher priority should be to arrange his older, rather than his contemporary, material. Again I stress that this is speaking, rather self-consciously, as an historian: the political journalist would no doubt disagree, and has his right to do so.

My definition of history suggests another way in which the historian should modify his attitude to archive availability. The exercise of his craft does not become impossible simply because he is not allowed to see certain documents. Flood, fire, death, and other disasters can all rob him of sources; so can an archivist’s decision. The historian might suffer anger and frustration in consequence, but he can still pursue history as defined in point 3 above.

— Michael Roe.