

Beyond the Pale? The 'flinty' relationship between archivists who collect the private records of individuals and the rest of the archival profession.*

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This paper addresses the questions 'An Inclusive or Exclusive Profession? Have collecting archivists and their concerns been marginalised by the mainstream profession? If so, why, do we deserve it, who or what suffers or benefits as a result, should we do anything about it and, if so, what?' The author presents evidence of the marginalisation of the concerns of collecting archivists in recent archival discourse and sets this trend within the context of the development of the archival profession in Australia. He concludes by calling upon collecting archivists to participate more actively in the archival discourse.

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An extract from a record posting by an Australian Archivist on the Archives Listserv:

The role of the archivist:

I do not accept the view that the role of an archivist is 'to preserve history', as Rob Spindler puts it. This may be the mission of manuscript libraries, but then I don't think they are archives in the true sense anyway. They may use archival techniques, but that does not make an archives (I can feel a flame war coming on). The role of archives is ensuring the creation and continuing preservation of evidence for the purpose of accountability. This is at its clearest in public archives. . .¹

LAST NOVEMBER IN THIS VERY BUILDING I experienced a sensation that, if I were to be pretentious, I could call an epiphany. Perhaps a more down-to-earth way of describing this experience, however, would be to say that 'A squall of knowledge struck the lad from Tangmalangmaloo'! One of the things that surprised me about the 'Playing For Keeps' conference was the number of personal records archivists who attended in the expectation that it would be of some assistance to them in coping with the dilemmas posed by personal records in electronic form. From the outset I felt that these people were being unduly optimistic. After all, the conference was organised by the Australian Archives and it was billed as an 'Electronic Records Management Conference', which, to me at any rate, suggested organisational records rather than personal records. Over the course of the conference a number of personal records archivists expressed their disappointment to me about the lack of relevance of the discussions to their needs. I greeted their expressions of disappointment philosophically, saying, in perhaps not so many words, 'well, what did you expect for heavens sake?'.⁴

Nevertheless, that vague feeling of dissatisfaction at once again eavesdropping on a discourse that ignored the sorts of concerns that exercise my mind in my day-to-day work gnawed away at my subconscious. I have to thank David Bearman, whose 'no bullshit' approach in the final session suddenly made me realise that the disquiet I was feeling was more than just annoyance at feeling pushed to the periphery, but in fact the realisation of a far more fundamental and vexing malaise. When pressed on how he foresaw the non-custodial approach to managing electronic records coping with the long-term cultural/historical imperatives of archives, Bearman asserted that it was not the job of archivists to address these concerns and that there are plenty of museum curators who can take care of that sort of thing.² To Bearman, archivists need to be glorified records managers whose view to the future

should extend only as far as the needs of ongoing corporate accountability and administrative efficiency. While this is of course an extreme position and one that I suspect even David Bearman in his heart of hearts does not really believe, it nevertheless highlights a disturbing trend in recent archival thinking. This trend is towards a narrowing of our conception of what archives are and what archivists do. The trend is particularly apparent in the somewhat lopsided electronic records discourse, but it can also be discerned in other areas of archival thinking. A number of archivists, in their rush to find new allies and to deploy the powerful argument of 'organisational accountability', appear to be willing to jettison, or at the very least downplay, our historical/cultural role. In the process they may wittingly or unwittingly marginalise and stigmatise those archivists, most particularly collecting archivists, for whom historical/cultural considerations provide their *raison d'être*.

For a while following my epiphany I wondered whether I was just being too sensitive. After all, while believing that the concerns of collecting archivists have been marginalised in recent years, at a personal level I have received nothing but support and encouragement from mainstream archivists who have demonstrated interest in and curiosity about the archival problems of personal papers. My suspicions were, however, confirmed by Terry Cook who, in a footnote in his groundbreaking article 'Electronic Records Paper Minds', articulated the problem more lucidly than I could ever hope to:

To dismiss such private records (and the archivists who deal with them) as being beyond the pale of archives (meaning narrowly defined corporate and government archives), as I occasionally heard in Australia, diminishes in my view, the entire profession and our documentary heritage.³

Bob Dylan may not have needed a weatherman to know which way the wind was blowing, but I am grateful to Cook for being my weatherman and confirming that the wind is indeed blowing in the direction I thought.

It is time for another example. One aspect of the electronic records discourse has been a discussion of the definition of a record. A consensus appears to have emerged which defines a record in transactional terms.⁴ This counter productively narrow concept of the record is to me symptomatic of the corporate myopia afflicting many of today's archival theoreticians. It skirts the slippery concept of the evidential nature of records and excludes such non-organisational material as personal diaries and literary drafts, the 'recordness' of which to me is defined by their evidential qualities.

What mindset underpins this seemingly relentless drive towards a narrower conception of archives? Given my own historical inclinations, it is perhaps

not surprising that I look to history for an explanation. The first thing I should point out is that we are far from being the first generation of personal records archivists to puzzle over the relevance and applicability of archival theory to our particular circumstances. For at least sixty years members of our sub-tribe have scratched their heads and pondered exactly how to apply the lofty principles of Sir Hilary Jenkinson to the personal papers of individuals. In the United States and in Australia the problem has been exacerbated in practical terms by the fact that it was librarians and not archivists who first took on the responsibility of rescuing archival materials. The fact that I work for the National Library illustrates the obvious fact that we are what we are because of our history.

The more recent emergence of an archival profession in these two countries has seen the occasional outbreak of border skirmishes/demarcation disputes between the two professions. In Australia, because the librarians had effectively cornered the market in personal records, archivists gravitated naturally towards the corporate/government records sphere. In defining what made them archivists, Australian archivists thought in terms of their corporate/government settings. In an attempt to solve the particular problems of complex twentieth century bureaucratic recordkeeping systems, the Australian Archives developed the series system in preference to a reliance on the record group. The first generation of Australian Archives archivists then dispersed from the mothership and colonised a range of smaller archival settings, taking the series system and adapting it as they went.⁵ Over time the system has become more than just a novel approach to archival thinking, but has in fact become part and parcel of the self-definition of a large number of Australian archivists. Australian archivists now fall into two categories, those who use the series system (or a variant thereof) and those who use the record group approach. While it may be an oversimplification, it is not too far wide of the mark to say that in general those archivists who deal with personal records use the record group, while those archivists who work with organisational/government records use the series system.

The spread of the series system had the effect of widening the pre-existing gap between those professionals who worked with personal records and the newly emerged archival profession. In an attempt to establish themselves as a profession with a distinct and separate identity, the first generation of Australian archivists were at pains to distance themselves from librarians and the pernicious practices in which many of the early librarians unquestionably indulged. In time archivists began to cast covetous glances towards the personal records sphere and we saw the welcome spread of

archivists and archival practices into the field, a development that was not only beneficial but which was also long overdue. Yet, despite the spread of archival practices into the personal records sphere, those archivists who work with personal records could not shake the feeling that they were somehow tainted by their history, a history which of course they should not have been held responsible for.

The history of the archival profession in Australia has consisted of occasional efforts to develop a unified and harmonious front interspersed with regular outbreaks of suspicion and hostility. Some years ago Colin Smith aptly described the relationship between the two sub-groups as a 'flinty' one.⁶ If anything, the situation in the United States is even worse. At least in Australia the Australian Archives and the ASA has played a largely positive role in the development of a professional self-image. These efforts have been bolstered by the emergence of some excellent postgraduate university archives courses. By contrast, I get the impression that in the USA the somewhat passive approach of NARA and the SAA towards professionalisation and the absence of any nationwide infrastructure for professional archival training has seen the domination of the American archival profession by a mixture of anti-intellectualism and the interdisciplinary imperialism of historians. It is perhaps as a reaction to these tendencies, which for better or worse are often associated with the historical manuscripts tradition, that recent writers such as David Bearman have been so dismissive of the concerns of personal records archivists and the historical/cultural imperatives of archives.

So, if we cannot look to the USA to provide a model for solving our current dilemma, where can we turn? The answer I believe lies in Canada. If I can again invoke the now famous Terry Cook footnote: 'While the Canadian "total archives" model is not possible to implement institutionally in Australia . . . its inclusive and comprehensive ideal has much to offer Australian archivists collectively. . .'⁷ The Canadians are fortunate to have an archival history which includes the early emergence of an archival profession concerned with the rescue of archival materials, both personal and administrative in origin. As a result, Canadian archivists have never experienced the kind of ambivalence towards personal records that has been the case with their Australian counterparts. Canadian archivists quite rightly recognise both personal and administrative records as being archival and have taken a commendably holistic approach to the appraisal and management of the wider body of Canada's documentary heritage. The Canadian literature on macro appraisal and the potential for national coordination of appraisal and documentation strategies⁸ illustrates just what there is to gain if we can only shed our petty

differences and shake off the shackles of historical prejudice. While we cannot change our history, we have it within our power to change our future.

Our ultimate aim should be to forge a profession which is proud of its plurality, a profession where differences are examined and explored with interest rather than seen as grounds for suspicion and ostracism. We need to strive for a fluid and integrated professional discourse which both celebrates diversity and emphasises our commonality of interests and philosophies. Archivists should be universally encouraged to aspire to, and have a stake in, the highest possible standards of professional practice.

What role can we, as collecting archivists, play in this process? First and foremost, we have to get much more involved in the professional discourse. If I am critical of the lopsided nature of the electronic records discourse, this should not be taken as criticism of the writers who have at least taken the trouble to grapple with the complex challenges posed. If the electronic records debate appears irrelevant and lopsided to collecting archivists then collecting archivists have really only got themselves to blame. It is time we stopped sitting around waiting for someone else to solve our problems for us. We have simply got to take responsibility for our own destiny. The same goes for the appraisal debate, or the descriptive standards debate, or any other topic of archival interest. Not only do collecting archivists suffer by not absorbing and participating in these debates, the debates themselves suffer from the absence of our input. If a discourse appears irrelevant to your needs, do not just moan about it, get in and say your piece, do some research and impart the benefits of your experience. You never know, you may not only find an interested audience, you may destroy a few preconceptions in the process. Be inspired by the work of my fellow panelist, Chris Hurley, whose archival writings have consistently drawn upon both the corporate records and personal records spheres in imaginative ways that have helped illuminate some hitherto darkened corners of archival theory and practice.⁹ We can no longer afford to sit on the sidelines while important advances in archival thinking are developed by others. It is time we became participants and not just spectators.

In conclusion, should anyone doubt that personal records are archival in nature and must be managed as archives then — SAY IT LOUD — I AM A COLLECTING ARCHIVIST AND I AM PROUD!

Endnotes

1. Posting on the Archives Listserv by Tim Robinson, 21 July 1995.
2. S. Yorke (ed.), *Playing for Keeps. The Proceedings of an Electronic Records Management Conference Hosted by the Australian Archives. Canberra. Australia, 10 November 1994*, Australian Archives, Canberra, 1995, pp. 319–320.
3. T. Cook, 'Electronic Records, Paper Minds', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 22, no. 2, November 1994, p. 322.
4. See for example: D. Roberts, 'Defining electronic records, documents and data', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 22, no. 1, May 1994, pp. 14–27; and R. Cox, 'The Record: is it evolving?', *Records and Retrieval Report*, vol. 10, no. 3, March 1994, pp. 1–16.
5. S. McCausland, 'Adapting the Series System: a study of small archives applications', in *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years*, eds S. McKemmish and M. Piggott, Ancora Press in association with Australian Archives, Clayton Victoria, 1994, pp. 173–186.
6. C. Smith, 'A Hitch-hikers guide to Australian archival history' in *Archival Documents: Providing Accountability Through Recordkeeping*, eds S. McKemmish and F. Upward, Ancora Press, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 197–210.
7. Cook, op. cit., p. 322.
8. See for example: J. Cumming, 'Beyond intrinsic value towards the development of acquisitions strategies in the private sector: the experience of the Manuscript Division, National Archives of Canada', *Archivaria*, no. 38, Summer 1994, pp. 232–39; R. Cox, 'The Documentation strategy and archival principles: a different perspective', *Archivaria*, no. 38, Summer 1994, pp. 11–36; and Helen W. Samuels, 'Improving our disposition: documentation strategy', *Archivaria*, no. 33, no. 1, Winter 1991/92, pp. 125–140.
9. Recent examples include: C. Hurley, 'The Australian ("Series") System: an exposition', in S. McKemmish and M. Piggott, op. cit., pp. 150–172; and C. Hurley, 'Problems with Provenance', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 23, no. 2, November 1995, pp. 234–59.