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Review of A History of Archival Practice and Engaging with Records and Archives: Histories and Theories

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Paul Delsalle. *A History of Archival Practice*. Translated by Margaret Proctor. 1998; New York: Routledge, 2018.

Fiorella Foscarini, Heather MacNeil, Bonnie Mak, and Gillian Oliver, eds. *Engaging with Records and Archives: Histories and Theories*. London: Facet Publishing, 2016.

Archivists are obsessed with context. It is their job to determine the context for a collection so users can best access and understand the materials being used. By knowing the origins and history of how archives and archival materials have been preserved and organized over time, archivists can do their work even better. These two recently published books provide a contextual look into the history and application of archival practices.

While archivists pay careful attention to the context of collections in their care, often they are unaware of their own profession's history of archival traditions and practices. Archivists should go back to the basics to reassure themselves that what they are doing is significant and worthwhile. Paul Delsalle's 1998 work, *A History of Archival Practices*, is an excellent way to become familiar with the international history of archival practices. The book is well organized, and the table of contents provides an accurate projection of the author's argument. Margaret Proctor has recently revised and translated it into English, making it available to a new generation of archivists.

Proctor, who is a senior lecturer in record and archive studies at the University of Liverpool, intends for this edition to become more accessible to "Anglophone" readers by providing further cogent examples of archival practices in English-speaking lands. She also replaces the original bibliography and references "with equivalent English-languages ones" (xv). The chapters' bibliographies and footnotes are one of the gems of this collection. They offer readers the opportunity to follow up further on topics and practices of interest.

The originality of this book lies in its subject matter and approach to the history of archival practices. However, as twenty years have passed since the original publication of Delsalle's book in French, an updated edition was needed. Due to Proctor's translation and revision, it is up to date once again, and her revisions contain more examples from the English-speaking world. Unfortunately, her examples are predominantly from Great Britain and not from the United States, Canada, or Australia, which are only mentioned in the last chapter. Therefore, it falls as far from the mark as the original in terms of a universal/transnational survey. The new edition still hovers around a Eurocentric map.

Presenting the history of archives from antiquity to the present is no small task, and this book does that work adequately. Too often, archivists and historians neglect to study the practices of civilizations that did not have a system of writing. Therefore, some very interesting examples of archival practices get overlooked, such as the Quecha civilization's record-keeping system based on *quipu* (bundles of cords with knots), which recorded significant information in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (58–59). Nor have archivists spent much time studying archival arrangement when William Prynne "imposed" an order on "the Dungheap" of the English Chancery court records in the seventeenth century (134). Not only are these examples

anecdotally interesting but they also reflect archival problems of today, such as providing adequate access, preservation/conservation, arrangement and description, and the loss of archival materials due to natural disasters, wars, and overzealous tidiness.

Even though this is a revised translation, there does not seem to be any change of voice or style. The writing is clear, precise, and logical. This is not an easy task and reveals the trademark of an excellent translator. Still, Proctor's translation has a few problematic areas, notably her editing and revising of the original footnotes. As promised, she enhances the book with more English-language examples but unfortunately deletes some of the French- and other language footnotes in the process. This renders the original text unsupported. For example, in removing certain French footnotes, some important points from Delsalle's book now seem like outrageous overstatements. For example, she writes, "The widespread adoption of underwear (particularly in the eighteenth century) ensured a larger supply of rags and the concomitant development of paper production everywhere in Europe" (75). Proctor's revision overstates Delsalle's term *development du linge de corps*, which simply means a general usage of underwear, elevating it to sound like an underwear revolution. This mistranslation also drops the footnotes contained in the original, which might have helped readers better understand the shift to paper in the eighteenth century.

The edited collection *Engaging with Records and Archives*, as is common with many such works, fails to forge a clear connection among the articles besides the fact that they were all presented at the 2015 I-CHORA conference. This book, like Delsalle's, covers a diverse range of chronological and theoretical perspectives on archival collections and practices. But instead of providing an overarching narrative that looks at "global" trends in archival practice, the articles in *Engaging with Records* examine archival theories and collection-specific archival practices.

I-CHORA, the International Conference of the History of Records and Archives, provides researchers with an excellent forum for producing new scholarship and disseminating it to an international audience. This book is one of the organization's outstanding accomplishments. By introducing this global representation of archivists and record managers, it has renewed interest in the histories and theories of archives and archival practices. The editors of *Engaging with Records and Archives* successfully achieve their stated goal of promoting international, interdisciplinary research and engaging a scholarly community in the process. And they are correct in saying that it is important for archivists to become part of "think[ing] differently about how we understand, interpret and interact with histories and theories of the archive and archives" (xv).

The book is divided into two sections, "Rethinking Histories and Traditions" and "Engaging Records and Archives." The first section contains theoretical analyses, which are of more value to educators and students than they are to practicing archivists. Juan Ilerbaig, in "'Records in Context' in Content: A Brief History of Data Modelling for Archival Description," compares archivists to paleontologists, as both have to reconstruct the order of things, whether they are skeletons or collections, to discover their context. Marlene Manoff's article, "Mapping Archival Silence: Technology and the Historical Record," discusses one of the profession's hot topics, archival silences, and how users of archival records view these quite differently than the archivists involved. And Elizabeth Shepherd, in "Hidden Voices in the Archives: Pioneering

Women Archivists in Early 20th Century England,” counters Manoff by arguing that historians and other users of archives do not truly understand what archivists do. This last article intriguingly brings the theories together with the practice to solve this particular, longstanding problem of archival silence.

The second section, “Engaging Records and Archives,” develops a more in-depth look into the roles of archivists and their practices. Stefano Gardini, in “The Use and Reuse of Documents by Chancellors, Archivists and Government Members in an Early Modern Republican State: Genoa’s *Ginta dei confine* and Its Archives,” provides a case study on Genoa’s archives, which maintained successfully accessible and locatable archival materials until Napoleon annexed the city in the nineteenth century. Paul Lihoma’s article, “History and Development of Information and Recordkeeping in Malawi,” examines the sub-Saharan African nation of Malawi, whose indigenous record-keeping systems were replaced by the British at the end of the nineteenth century and from which researchers were barred access without proper bureaucratic approval.

Many of the articles in the book are too overspecialized to be truly useful. For example, Juan Ilerbaig’s comparison of the work of paleontologists and archivists provides thought-provoking analysis, but the metaphors have little practical use. Jeanette A. Bastian’s “theoretical archive” in “Moving the Margins to the Middle: Reconciling ‘the Archive’ with the Archives” is too fluid as it depends on which individual or discipline is using it. And Sian Vaughan’s article, “Reflecting on Practice: Artists’ Experiences in the Archives,” is a well-worn archival critique of archivists’ failures to engage with art and artists, even though the essay offers a unique explanation of Banksy’s latest stunt at a Sotheby’s auction in October 2018.¹

Both books have an international focus that is often lacking in the *Fundamentals in Archival Practices* series of the Society of American Archivists. Read together, these two monographs provide an interesting and challenging viewpoint on archivists and archival practices in their historical and contemporary contexts. Archivists who gain familiarity with their professions’ past theories and practices through these books can become better archivists for the present and the future.

¹ Scott Reyburn, “Banksy Painting Self-Destructs after Fetching \$1.4 Million at Sotheby’s,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/06/arts/design/uk-banksy-painting-sothebys.html>.