



<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic> • ISSN 1492-7810

2007 • Vol. 7, No. 1

To See Archives Plain: Reflections on Recordkeeping and Archives

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Take me way back. Help me to understand.

Van Morrison

In his song, “Take Me Back” from the album *Hymns to the Silence*, Van Morrison laments the loss of innocence and knowledge in a world with “too much confusion” and contrasts it with a time when “everything made more sense.”¹ Morrison’s song explores and contrasts present-day pressures and realities with a remembrance of earlier times. This contrast occurs both lyrically and musically, for instance, when at one point the song acknowledges the historical roots of Morrison’s own music, referencing Sonny Boy Williamson — the great blues harmonica player from the 1940s, whose lyrical reference in the song precedes Morrison’s own harmonica solo. Similar to Morrison’s ode to the past and his reworking of “classic” blues with his own contemporary brand of Celtic soul, the reissue of a number of seminal archival texts by the Society of American Archivists provides a much-needed historical perspective on the act of recordkeeping and the role it plays in keeping archives today.

The Society of American Archivists’ Publications Committee reissue of what it’s calling its “archival classics” series presents an engaging perspective on the way archivists have thought about their work over the past one-hundred years. The recently republished series of texts offer a view on archival work that is unique to the time of their initial publication; yet, it also provides insight into the work archivists do today — work that is more or less unchanged since the Dutch archivists S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin first published their *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* in 1898.²

When I first read some of these books in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was in school completing a Masters of Archival Studies degree. Nearly twenty years later, I took the opportunity to re-read them without the pressures of exams, essays, or a thesis. Like Van the man says, “help me understand. . .” So, in an effort to further understand the intellectual underpinnings of my profession, what follows is part personal reflection on some fundamental archival principles and ideas as well as an attempt to explore the linkages between the notion of recordkeeping in archives as it is articulated in these “classic” texts on

¹ Van Morrison, “Take Me Back,” *Hymns to the Silence*, September 1991, Polydor 849 026-2.

² See the latest edition, S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, Archival Classics Series, 2003).

archives filtered through my own experience as an archivist and now senior manager in the Provincial Archives of Alberta.

“Archival Classics” and Recordkeeping

Founded in 1936, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) is North America’s oldest and largest national archival professional association. As part of an already extensive publications program that includes over one-hundred titles, the Association has reissued a number of archival writings that it promotes as its “archival classics series.” Many of them are seminal texts on archival theory and history, most of which have been out of print since their initial publication run.

The series is evolving all the time. At present, eight titles range from reissues of earlier SAA publications to new collections of writings by writers on archival theory and practice that are being collected and published for the first time.³ However, the individual texts that have always struck me as the most engaging, in part due to their age as being the oldest dated writings in the series, are also the most insightful for archival practice and theory: *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, the *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*; and *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Management*.⁴

Viewed together, these texts present a comprehensive view of the traditional archival mission from a European, British, and North American perspective at critical junctures in each country’s archival development: respectively, the Netherlands in the late 1800s, Britain in the 1920s and 1930s, and the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. Each writer explores the basic tenants of archival practice: archival acquisition and appraisal, preservation and access, and the day-to-day challenges of archival work. Although they do not present a grand or over-arching theory of archives, I’d suggest that they propose a set of theoretical insights into archives very much rooted in the experience and practice of keeping archives. What distinguished these texts at the time of their publication and ultimately, what continues to distinguish them from so much contemporary writings on archives, is their probing of the everyday problems and issues of recordkeeping and archives and their insistence on asking the hard questions which inform the bedrock of archival theory: *What* are archives? *Why* do we keep records? And, *which* records do we keep?

In his 1968 Foreword in the 2003 reissue of the *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, Ken Munden remarked that, retuning to the *Manual* at this time is “once more to see archives plain.” The *Manual* introduces readers to the concept of original order: “[O]nly official documents, i.e., those received by administrative bodies or officials belong to the archival collection.” In turn, the *Manual* links original

³ The full series includes: Angelika Menne-Haritz, ed., *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays of Ernst Posner* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1967; reprint 2006); Menne-Haritz, *Archives in the Ancient World* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, Archival Classics Series, 1972; reprint 2003); Richard Cox, ed., *Lester J. Cappon and the Relationship of History, Archives, and Scholarship in the Golden Age of Archival Theory* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2004); Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*; T.R. Scellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, Archival Classics Series, 1956; reprint 2003); Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1965; reprint 1981); Thorton W. Mitchell, ed., *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Management* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, Archival Classics Series, 1975); and finally, Robert Ellis and Peter Walne, eds., *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, Archival Classics Series, 2003).

⁴ Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *The Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*; Ellis and Walne, *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*; Mitchell, *Norton on Archives*.

order conceptually to the notion of an archival fonds — “an archival collection is an organic whole. . .”⁵ Originally published in 1898, the *Manual* proposed a working synthesis of ideas and practices concerning the arrangement and description of archives in much the same fashion as the *Rules for Archival Description*⁶ had in Canada in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Further, like the *Rules for Archival Description*, the *Manual* promotes the notion of the fonds or “organic whole” of records as the basis for archival description.

The Dutch *Manual*, as it has come to be called, is divided into six chapters that in their turn explore the “origin and composition of archival depositories,” the arrangement and description of archival records, and the archival finding aid or inventory, as well as offering “further directions for the description of archives” and advice on the use of certain terms and signs in inventories. The *Manual* is organized around one-hundred rules for the archivist to follow, all strictly informed by the principle that, “the original organization of an archival collection must naturally correspond in its main lines to the old organization of the administrative body which produced it,”⁷ and that the archival collection or *archieff* is fundamental to the practice of archives. It is in these efforts to promote the arrangement and description of archives within the context of a broader view of recordkeeping in general which elevates the Dutch archivists’ work above a “how to” textbook to a set of guiding first principles. To be sure, that as a profession, we continue to explore the concept of the fonds. Its formulations and application in our contemporary literature is testimony to the *Manual’s* continued relevance to present-day archival practice.⁸

While the *Manual* presents a fairly concentrated perspective on archival practices, offering essential information and insight into the nature of archives related to their arrangement and description, both the books on Sir Hilary Jenkinson and Margaret Cross Norton offer broader, more holistic, views, perspectives, and ideas on the archival mission.⁹ The *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* is compiled from essays, presentations, and articles originally written between 1915 and 1960, and published by the British Society of Archivists in 1980.¹⁰ Jenkinson first started working in the Public Records Office (PRO) in London in 1906 and remained employed with the PRO for the next forty-eight years. The last seven years he headed the institution as deputy keeper. Jenkinson’s writings on archives may be neatly grouped into three related themes: *Studies*: studies of paleography, medieval tallies, and seals; *Archives During Wartime*: writings published during World Wars I and II which explore recordkeeping issues related to wartime; and, *Archives and Archivists*: which includes landmark essays such as “The English Archivist: A New Profession” (1947), “The Librarian as Archivist” (1928),¹¹ and Jenkinson’s writings on the “classification” of archives.

Margaret Cross Norton’s essays, on the other hand, are later in date and span the years 1930 through 1956. Like Jenkinson’s writings, Margaret Cross Norton’s work covers a host of archival subjects from a variety of perspectives. Norton, who was the state archivist for Illinois (1922-1957), probes the nature of archives in essays such as “The Scope and Function of Archives” (1930/1937), and “The Purpose and Nature of Archives” (1943/1945). As well, topics are covered such as “The Classification and Description of Archives” (1940/1946), and the archival relationship to records management. Norton’s essay, “The

⁵ Ken Munden, “Foreward,” in Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 15, 19.

⁶ *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Canada, 1990).

⁷ Muller, Feith, and Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 52.

⁸ See, for example, Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, 1992).

⁹ Ellis and Walne, *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*; Mitchell, *Norton on Archives*.

¹⁰ Ellis and Walne, *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*. The latest edition is 2003.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 236-259 and 115-121 respectively.

Archivist and Records Management" (1956),¹² in my view remains essential reading for those working in a records management/archives environment. Considering the records and archives discourse in the United States at the time that promoted the research value of archives almost exclusive to any others, Norton's views and insights into the administrative role of records and archives furthered a discourse that began in the modern sense with the *Manual* through to Jenkinson's many writings on archives. Norton writes:

First of all it is necessary to emphasize the point that archives are not historical documents — they are not diaries of Civil War heroes, or military roles which prove one's eligibility to membership in a patriotic society nor are they the autographs of the presidents. Archives are business records of a government, a business firm, an ecclesiastical body or even an individual, preserved as a memorandum of business transactions, and particularly because they are potential evidence for any court or other legal proceedings which involve matters recorded in such memoranda.¹³

This is, in effect, an expression of provenance and purpose equal to that expressed by the Dutch archivists in 1898. However, the most engaging sections of both books and that which elevates them, in my opinion, into the theoretical, are the authors' respective meditations on the nature of archives. In other words, what are archives?

In his essay, "The Classification and Survey of English Archives" (1943), Jenkinson ponders what he considers the "qualities" of archives — their "natural" character, "impartiality," "inter-related[ness]," and "authenticity." His conclusions define for archivists the nature of archives while also promoting a view of the archival enterprise that is equally as relevant today as it was sixty-four years ago. The "moral defense of archives" comprises, in his view, "all the problems attendant on the archivist's task of making his archives available. . . [and] of selecting what is worth preserving."¹⁴ Archives are, writes Jenkinson in 1947, "the Documents accumulated by natural process in the course of the Conduct of Affairs of any kind, Public or Private, at any date; and preserved thereafter for Reference, in their own Custody, by the persons responsible for the Affairs in question or their successor."¹⁵

Norton as well, grapples with these issues. Her writing on the scope, purpose and nature of archives endeavors to locate archives firmly in the administrative and business context within which they were created and used. Norton, more than anyone else mentioned thus far, articulates and promotes a vision of archives that is at once plain and simple without being simplistic. "The real function of the archivist," she writes in the early 1930s, "is that of custodian of legal records of the state, the destruction of which might seriously inconvenience the administration of state business."¹⁶ Following this first principle of sorts, throughout her writings, Norton systematically examines the purpose and nature of recordkeeping practices as they impact archives, the physical properties of archives, the handling and repair of fragile documents, the protection of records from disaster, photographic and micrographic issues, and even records disposal and records management. Ultimately, however, Norton's linkage of the administrative nature of archives with the emerging profession of records management in the United States distinguishes her writings and even today inform the recordkeeping practices of most of the larger corporate archival institutions.

¹² Mitchell, *Norton on Archives*, 247-265.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁴ Ellis and Walne, *Selected Writing of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, 119.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁶ Mitchell, *Norton on Archives*, 56.

The writings of the Dutch archivists, as well as Sir Hilary Jenkinson and Margaret Cross Norton, consistently probe the fundamentals of archives and recordkeeping, ostensibly the “moral defense of archives”¹⁷ as Jenkinson put it. They each explore the essential problems of keeping archives from the perspectives of both their overall management and from the working archivist’s point of view: What are archives, which archives should one keep, how can they be best arranged and described, and finally, how can archives be best presented so that they can be accessed and used? These essential recordkeeping problems continue to inform archival work today. To be sure, the discourse has evolved somewhat; however, the questions remain the same, and I believe the answers provided by these writers continue to provide intellectual nourishment and direction.

Recordkeeping Legislation and the Provincial Archives

“It is a rule in government that records follow functions,” wrote Norton in 1940. Further, records maintained by a government department as evidence of its business activities should be kept together and arranged “in a manner to reflect the administrative use of those documents.”¹⁸ An understanding and acknowledgement of recordkeeping practices in the Government of Alberta can be traced back to 1925.¹⁹ *The Preservation of Public Documents Act* defined “public documents” as “certificated under the Great Seal of the Province, legal documents, securities[,]. . . vouchers, cheques and accounting records.” The *Act* further noted that “all public documents shall be preserved by the department to the affairs of which they relate for a period of ten years from their coming into existence or until their transfer or destruction is ordered by the Lieutenant Governor in Council.” The Lieutenant Governor is also given authority under the *Act* to “at any time require that any such document, or any class or series of such documents, be transferred to the archives of the Province.”²⁰ And while an archive did not yet formally exist in the province at this time, it was the Legislative Library that assumed the records preservation role for the next forty years.

In 1961, the *Act* was amended to reduce the retention period for records preservation from ten to five years. In 1963, the Provincial Archives as an institution was conceived, with records moved to Beaver House in Edmonton to relieve the space pressures accruing in the ministries and at the Legislature Library. Two years later, a provincial archivist was appointed and processing began on the records that had been transferred to Beaver House.

Repealing both *The Preservation of Public Documents Act* and *The Registered Documents Destruction Act*, *The Provincial Archives Act* was assented to in 1966 and ostensibly confirmed the “archives” as both an institution and program for the Government of Alberta. The *Act* defined “documents,” “official documents,” and “public documents,” and outlined the duties of the Provincial Archivist. It also defined and outlined the roles and responsibilities of the Public Documents Committee that was tasked with “by unanimous decision, sanction[ing] the destruction of any public or official documents, or any class thereof, where it is satisfied that the preservation of the documents is not required for the purposes of the Provincial Archives. . . .”²¹ Finally, in 1970, *The Provincial Archives Act* was repealed with the authority for the Provincial Archives incorporated into the *Alberta Heritage Act*. The records management provisions of *The Provincial Archives Act* were transferred and found articulation in the *Public Documents Act*. With

¹⁷ Ellis and Walne, *Selected Writing of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, 115-121.

¹⁸ Mitchell, *Norton on Archives*, 110.

¹⁹ This chronology of legislation owes much to the unpublished essay by Dave Leonard “Records Management in Alberta — An Administrative History.”

²⁰ Statutes of Alberta, Chapter 31, *An Act Respecting the Preservation of Public Documents* (1925), 143.

²¹ Statutes of Alberta, Chapter 73, *An Act Respecting Provincial Archives* (1966), section 6 (2), 384.

further amendments to the *Alberta Heritage Act* in 1973, the records management provisions were transferred back and re-defined in part 2 of the *Alberta Heritage Act*.

At this time, in 1973, the Public Documents Committee became known as the Public Records Committee under the authority of the newly-created Department of Culture. The process changes initiated by the legislation were more significant than the name change. Whereas previously, no formal records management mechanism existed to facilitate the transfer of records from ministries to the Provincial Archives, the Public Documents Committee was authorized to “establish disposition schedules including the retention, destruction or transfer to the Provincial Archives.” Thus, public records could now be dealt with systematically as each department was required to appoint an employee “to act as the records officer and to be responsible for all aspects of records management within that department with the advice and assistance of the Public Documents Committee.”²²

While the administration and authorities have evolved over the past thirty-five years, the recordkeeping process and purpose remain largely the same. A Public Documents Committee continues to this day, although now it has been renamed the Alberta Records Management Committee. It is tasked with the review of government-wide records activities and approving all disposition schedules created by ministry records officers who are known as Senior Records Officers. Presently, all records management and information management matters are under the administration of Service Alberta’s Records and Information Management Branch while the management of the Provincial Archives continues under the culture and heritage banner presently in the Ministry of Tourism, Parks, Recreation, and Culture.

Recordkeeping and Archives

The recordkeeping and archival practices in the Government of Alberta over the past eighty-plus years are very much informed by the archival principles and practices articulated by Jenkinson and Norton. The administrative context of the records’ original purpose, the legislative framework for their control and management, the principle of provenance acknowledging the context of their creation and use, as well as their subsequent public access are all informed by the same impulse of selection and preservation.²³

Recordkeeping is an administrative act. A record’s purpose is first and foremost administrative in nature — the capture of evidence of the acts and activities which generate it. While many of today’s archival institutions maintain a certain thematic emphasis, they do so only in the sense that a portion of their holdings contain a specific subject focus; however, the records which these archives acquire and promote continue to be the by-products of the same organizational activities as those created in the Government of Alberta context noted above. They have a provenance, original order, and evidentiary nature comparable with the public records so near and dear to Norton and her colleagues. That records are used for historical inquiry is, as Norton put it in “The Archivist and Records Management,” only “so much velvet.”²⁴

Today, archivists struggle with a number of issues such as the alarming increase in the number of records created and believed needed to be preserved, storage space, and the preservation environments required to effectively maintain records over long periods of time. As well, archivists continue to explore a number of intellectual issues: archival appraisal, the control of records, and the provision of access to archives. In effect, these are the same issues that informed the *Manual* of one-hundred rules for the arrangement and description of archives. That said, the most pressing issue for archivists today relates to the management of digital information or “electronic records.” A recent Associated Press article suggests

²² Statutes of Alberta, Chapter 5, *The Alberta Heritage Act* (1973), section 10 (2)(a) & 11 (2), 27.

²³ Ellis and Walne, *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, 119.

²⁴ Mitchell, *Norton on Archives*, 251.

that “the world generated 161 billion gigabytes of digital information last year” alone. Furthermore, even Microsoft executives are warning of a “digital dark age” unless something is done regarding file formats and digital storage capacity options.²⁵

There is much significant research and insight already published on electronic records and digital preservation that it would be beyond the scope of this Forum article to even attempt a review. To be sure, the Provincial Archives of Alberta has struggled for years to promote a digital archive strategy, and it continues to struggle with the challenges of implementation as do most archives and governments in the rest of Canada. However, what is relevant from an “archives plain” perspective is that Jenkinson, in his writings on paleography and “seals,” articulated some basic assumptions about recordkeeping and archives that may inform the contemporary discourse on electronic records. For instance, essential to an archival understanding of “court hand” was an understanding of from whence the medieval texts came. “We are referring,” Jenkinson wrote, “to the documentary remains, formal and informal, of the Courts of Exchanger. . . [and]. . . of all kinds of private and semi-private Administrations.” In short, provenance; the provenance of structured and unstructured data in today’s digital and online environments that provide the documentary evidence of the acts and activities of both public and private records creators.²⁶

For all intents and purposes, Jenkinson is touching on the issue of a records authenticity. Similarly, Jenkinson’s writings on “seals” may be read as linked to contemporary notions of digital signatures and “checksums” as they pertain to preservation and authenticity in a digital archive environment.²⁷ Indeed, the entire contemporary InterPARES project,²⁸ a multi-year, interdisciplinary, international investigation into the preservation of authentic electronic records, is in many ways comparable to Jenkinson’s own efforts to understand issues of authenticity as they related to court hand, seals, and medieval tallies. To be sure, while the physical properties of the record have evolved — from velum to paper to bytes in a virtual environment, the recordkeeping issues and principles which inform, remain.

I do believe that archival theory has much to offer contemporary discourses on information management, enterprise content management, e-discovery, metadata, knowledge management, enterprise risk management, access, and information privacy matters. At the crux of each of these practices is the “office machinery which produced them,”²⁹ for these present-day disciplines are to a large extent the by-products of organizational activities and business needs, informed by the need to provide context and meaning to our acts and actions. Archival theory is ostensibly concerned with *why*, *how*, and *which* records we opt to preserve. Whether we are reframing the issues in a “post modern” context, as is currently the vogue in some quarters, or in the context of digital preservation and archives, the fundamental underpinnings of these questions “takes us back” to the record and the recordkeeping practices that illuminated their creation and use, not to mention the challenges associated with their

²⁵ “World is Running out of Cyberspace to Store Mountains of Digital Information,” *The Edmonton Journal*, 6 March 2007.

²⁶ Sir Hilary Jenkinson, “Paleography and the Practical Study of Court Hand,” “Some Notes on the Preservation, Moulding and Casting of Seals,” “The Study of English Seals,” and “Seals in Administration: A Plea for Systematic Study,” in *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, eds. Ellis and Walne, 13, 27, 147, 361.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See the InterPARES Project at <http://www.interpares.org/index.htm>, “The InterPARES (International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems) Project is a major international research initiative in which archival scholars, computer engineering scholars, national archival institutions, and private industry representatives are collaborating to develop the theoretical and methodological knowledge required for the long-term preservation of the authenticity of records created in electronic systems. The InterPARES Project is based in the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia” (The InterPARES 1 Project, 2002).

²⁹ Ellis and Walne, *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, 250.

preservation. As Van Morrison finally realizes in the song quoted at the beginning of this article, “and the music on the radio, had so much soul.”³⁰

³⁰ Morrison, “Take me Back.”