

Closing an Era

Historical Perspectives
on Modern Archives and
Records Management

RICHARD J. COX

New Directions in Information Management, Number 35
MICHAEL BUCKLAND, Series Advisor



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Preface

Considering how technology and science relate to society's continuing evolution, the eminent physicist Freeman Dyson wrote these memorable words: "In every civilization, the skilled artificer has an honored place beside the scribe and the shaman."¹ Whereas Dyson was examining the role of the "artificer"—the technologist and scientist—I am considering in this book the role of the scribe—or, in this case, the modern equivalent in the archivist and records manager.

A decade of experience in teaching future archivists and records managers is at the core of this book's content. These nine chapters explore the importance of records in our modern society, a seemingly modest and mundane topic in all the glitter and glamour of the Information or Knowledge Age, by re-examining some of the historical antecedents for critical functions in the modern records profession. My motivation for writing this book comes from my conviction of the importance of records and records professionals in organizations and society, as well as the need to possess a stronger sense of the events, trends, people, debates, and controversies producing the modern records professions.

William Sullivan writes that a profession is "in business for the common good as well as for the good of its members, or it is not a profession."² This two-edged sword to professionalism, a concept itself much maligned in this modern era when ready access to vast quantities of information seems destined to end the expert's monopoly over certain forms of knowledge, is particularly relevant in the modern Information Age. We live in a time when so many of the new technologies seem to threaten records, government accountability, corporate memories, individual rights, and self-understanding.

The array of information technologies provides many dangers and opportunities for traditional ways of managing records. The records profession-

als must contend with unprecedented rates and ranges of change, and their success or lack thereof has implications for every citizen. Again, William Sullivan reminds us that a “good practitioner is indeed a specialist who has learned the rules and basic techniques of a field.... However, the full dimensions of expertise are only revealed when a professional must respond to new, less defined situations.”³ We are preparing future archivists and records managers to work in situations that are certainly “less defined.” Many of the long-cherished ideas or concepts about records and archives were formed in societies and organizations very different from the ones in which we now operate. This book is an effort to wrestle with these ideas and to point to the future. Some of my convictions will appear conservative or traditional, as indeed they are, while others may seem too radical or theoretical, which I do not think they are. The importance of records, and the daily, unfolding challenges to the management of these records, merits new thinking and new approaches mixed with those that have stood the test of time and proven themselves.

These chapters are the result of re-writing and merging many essays written over the past decade. Where there is redundancy, and hopefully there is not so much of this that it is unnecessary or distracting to the reader, it has been left in order to stress certain key points about records and records management work in a new century. The sources of these essays were themselves disparate, ranging from commissioned essays to conference papers to essays that generated from my own preparation for teaching in the classroom. I do not consider these essays and this book to be definitive nor the last one that I write on the topic of records and archives. It represents my current best thinking about historical dimensions of the records and the records professions in the late 1990s. It has a similar purpose to what my 1990 book, *American Archival Analysis: The Recent Development of the Archival Profession in the United States*, aimed to do for archives and records management in the 1970s and 1980s. If I am still thinking, teaching, and writing about such things a decade from now, I suspect that my ideas will have shifted in other directions (and maybe I’ll write another book). I honestly do not believe in definitive statements written about archives and records management, whether they are written by me; the pioneer records management thinkers Hilary Jenkinson, T. R. Schellenberg, and Margaret Cross Norton; or the new generation of leading records and archives theorists David Bearman, Terry Cook, Luciana Duranti, Margaret Hedstrom, Sue McKemmish, and Frank Upward—to name a small number of such people. The world is changing far *too* rapidly for the last word to be said or written on the subject of archives and records management.

Chapter 1 is an introduction to the general challenge of studying the history of archives and records management. Much of the first chapter comes from an essay entitled “The Failure or Future of American Archival History: A Somewhat Unorthodox View,” *Libraries and Culture* 35, no. 1 (2000): 141–154.

Chapters 2 and 3 are mostly a freshly written history of the management of

records. I have tried to avoid the problem of viewing past records practices only through the modern issues of records management. I am sure I am guilty of this to some extent, since I have intended these chapters as a corrective to the tendency by modern records professionals to see the origins of their work as a twentieth century development, generally concentrated in the last fifty years of this century. I have drawn portions from earlier essays, such as “The Record: Is It Evolving?” *Records and Retrieval Report* 10 (March 1994): 1–16 and “Re-Defining Electronic Records Management,” *Records Management Quarterly* 30 (October 1996): 8–13, concerning the historical antecedents of contemporary archival and records management.

Chapter 4 is a re-working of a paper published in the proceedings of a 1990 conference and not widely read, it seems, in North America: “The Federal Government’s Interest in Archives of the United States,” in Oddo Bucci, ed., *Archival Science on the Threshold of the Year 2000* (Macerata, Italy: University of Macerata, 1993), pp. 207–241. As it turns out, the problems I wrestled with in that essay are intertwined with the history of records management in the United States and relevant for understanding the general history of records management.

Chapter 5, considering how archival appraisal and records management scheduling have developed, is drawn from a number of earlier writings, including “The Archival Documentation Strategy: A Brief Intellectual History, 1984–1994 and Practical Description,” *Janus* no. 2 (1995): 76–93; “The Long-Term Maintenance of Records,” *Records and Retrieval Report* 12 (April 1996): 1–16; “Records Management Scheduling and Archival Appraisal: Some Unconventional Thoughts on History, Purpose, and Process,” *Records and Information Management Report* 14 (April 1998): 1–16; “Archival Anchorites: Building Public Memory in the Era of the Culture Wars,” *Multicultural Review* 7 (June 1998): 52–60; and “Declarations, Independence, and Texts in the Information Age,” *First Monday* (June 1999) at http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue4_6/rjcox/index.html. This chapter is longer and more complicated because this is a more critical and complex records function.

Chapter 6, considering how archives and records fit into one of the more interesting manifestations of the late twentieth century, the interest in public memory, draws on “The Concept of Public Memory and Its Impact on Archival Public Programming,” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993): 122–135 and “Caught in the Web,” *Records and Information Management Report* 14 (November 1998): 1–16.

Chapter 7, examining the role education has played in the historical formation of the records professions, is built around the following earlier essays: “The Masters of Archival Studies and American Education Standards: An Argument for the Continued Development of Graduate Archival Education in the United States,” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993): 221–231; “The History of Primary Sources in Graduate Education: An Archival Perspective,” *Special Collections* 4, no. 2 (1990): 39–78; and “Millennial Thoughts on the Education of Records

Professionals,” *Records and Information Management Report* 15 (April 1999): 1–16. As an educator, it is difficult not to write at least one chapter on the importance of education for the history and present state of the records professions.

Chapters 8 and 9 conclude with examinations of more recent controversies in the records professions. Chapter 8, considering the relevancy of the continued publication of letterpress documentary editions, looks at this case in its broader historical contexts; this essay was originally published as “Messrs. Washington, Jefferson, and Gates: Quarrelling about the Preservation of the Documentary Heritage of the United States,” *First Monday* (August 1997), available at http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue2_8/cox/index.html. Chapter 9 considers the future of archives in the emerging cyberculture by re-considering the historical archival culture; this essay is a revised version of a paper presented at an October 1998 conference at University College Dublin.

A word ought to be stated about the manner in which I have treated the *records professions*. I obviously write from the perspective of an archivist and an archival educator, *but* I also am convinced that archives administration or records management is useful only when brought together administratively and conceptually. Still, the historic evolution of the records professions has made this a more complicated issue than it should be. Throughout this volume, I have tried to indicate when I am writing about the records professions in a collective or unified sense and when I am writing about one branch of these disciplines. Let me state up front that I acknowledge that archivists and records managers alike have made many significant contributions to the maintenance and protection of records. I sincerely wish I could write about *the* records profession.

As usual, this book is focused on North American archives, although some of the chapters go far afield of archives and records management in one continent. It should be obvious that I have drawn on the writings of archivists and records managers from around the world, but I make no pretense that what I have stated here is relevant to *every* nation or culture. Hopefully, this book will provoke others to write on these topics from other national and cultural perspectives.

I owe, as always, many debts to colleagues and students for the contents of these essays. I have thanked these people in earlier books. Let me acknowledge two different individuals, one anonymously. First, as can be seen in this preface, a number of portions of these essays were published in the *Records and Retrieval Report*, now the *Records and Information Management Report*, a monthly technical report edited by Ann Balough and published by Greenwood. I thank Ann and Greenwood’s managing editors who have supported this publication, because it has given me the opportunity to produce timely essays on professional issues. Second, I thank the anonymous reviewer of the original manuscript, who suggested there were two books here; this present volume, focusing on historical perspectives, is the first of the two volumes. Another book, focused on policy issues in archives and records management, is in preparation.

As always, I thank my wife, Lynn, and daughter, Emma, for tolerating my continuing work on issues represented in this book. Hopefully, Emma will see my music in these pages just as she sees her own elsewhere.

NOTES

1. Freeman J. Dyson, *The Sun, the Genomes, the Internet: Tools of Scientific Revolutions* (New York: The New York Public Library, Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 8.
2. William M. Sullivan, *Work and Integrity: The Crisis and Promise of Professionalism in America* (New York: HarperBusiness, 1995), p. 5.
3. Sullivan, *Work and Integrity*, pp. 174–175.

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1 Mythic Modern Origins and the History of Records Management

INTRODUCTION

In the intensely self-reflective and self-congratulatory writing about the modern Information Age, we find this typical statement: “Here at the end of the twentieth century, four decades into the computer age, it is increasingly obvious that the very nature of business itself is information. Many of the employees in any corporation are involved in the business of gathering, generating, or transforming information.... information has revised the workplace.”¹ One would never know records are involved in such organizations. While it may be true that new information technologies are having a revolutionary impact on organizations, these same organizations continue to generate large amounts of records because they are required to create documentation.

MYTHIC ORIGINS

Most American records professionals believe that their profession originated about a half century ago in the midst of the federal government’s efforts to control a rapidly increasing quantity of records resulting from the government’s growth in size and scope, an expansion necessitated by its contending with the Depression and Second World War. In the 1940s there was a succession of legislative acts supporting such an interpretation. The Federal Reports Act of 1942, according to one standard records management textbook, was the government’s “first attempt to control the paper-work burden placed on citizens and business through government paperwork requirements.”² This was the *first* major federal policy to address records burdens in government information collection, although this act was never implemented³ and a succession of similar efforts followed within a decade.

Government growth spurred efforts to manage records. The National Archives, founded in 1934 primarily as a cultural agency to care for the federal government's historical records, quickly found itself needing to administer current records. In 1941 it established a "records administration program" for advising about filing to facilitate eventual transfer to the National Archives. Two years later the Records Disposal Act authorized the National Archives' use of disposition schedules, although this did not stop the mounting quantity of records. Executive Order 9784, issued in 1946, required all executive branch agencies to implement records management programs and increased the records management authority of the National Archives, either evidence of progress in managing records or of the government's continuing failures to administer modern records. The records management responsibility of the National Archives was realized when the Hoover Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government recommended in 1948 that the National Archives be incorporated into a records management bureau under a Office of General Services.⁴ For the next forty years this administrative arrangement defined the role of the National Archives, although the clarity of this definition was poor as subsequent events suggest—especially regarding the relationship between archival administration and current records management and the professional identity for archivists and records managers.

Professional identity is one probable cause for the confused knowledge about the origins of records management. H. G. Jones, considering local government records, states that "because the National Archives was the main source for personnel experienced in records problems, agencies ... enticed away archivists who proceeded to develop in those agencies experimental programs of 'records administration'—the precursor of modern records management."⁵ This professional splintering is seen in the 1949 publication by the Public Administration Service, a pamphlet entitled *Public Records Administration* and written by Philip C. Brooks, a pioneering archivist in the National Archives. Twenty years later Frank Evans wrote, "in a very real sense this publication marked the close of one era and the beginning of another in the professional relations between archivists and records managers."⁶ Evans's essay, written just two decades later, was an effort to heal the break between archivists and records managers, a schism that has continued until the present with poor results for both groups. In the early 1980s, for example, a debate raged in Canadian records professional circles over an article written by archivist George Bolotenko, who stated that "it seems that the archivist has to choose one of several roads: to pursue his calling as archivist-historian, or to swing ever more into the newer form of records manager as a purveyor of data, an 'information scientist' The ethos of the two are antithetical: the records manager seeks to destroy, the archivist to preserve."⁷ Such perspectives were not limited to the archives side. Not too many years later a records management textbook suggested that the "distinction between archives and records centers is still based to a large extent on the type of records stored. In fact, in records management circles, archivists are some-

times unkindly referred to as pack rats, since their primary concern is the permanent preservation of all records that have or may have historical value.’’⁸

These attitudes seem nonsensical when considering the functions that comprise records management and archives administration. Records management encompasses forms management, files management, mail management, records surveys, and other functions—all supporting the main aim of records disposition. The Federal Records Act of 1950, coming out of the Hoover Commission, defined records management as including records creation, maintenance, and disposition and required each agency to establish an ongoing program for records management and to cooperate with the National Archives. National Archives theorists could fit all these pieces together, in effect bridging ancient and modern records practices. As Philip C. Brooks opined, “current record administration is to the archivist of today what the study of diplomatics was to the archivist of earlier times.”⁹ Diplomats, the study of the form and function of records, has in a somewhat surprising fashion re-emerged in the past decade as a core knowledge for archivists, a development which will be examined at several points in this book.

The 1950 records act formalized what most modern records professionals see as critical to their origins and mandate, becoming the touchstone for subsequent developments both in federal records management and in the management of records in other organizations. Even as electronic recordkeeping technologies emerged, the National Archives explained how these new systems were encompassed by the records law. In 1985, for example, it issued a brief pamphlet describing the Federal Records Act as the “basis for the Federal Government’s policies and procedures for creating, maintaining, and disposing of Federal records. The act and its related regulations define Federal records, mandate the creation and preservation of those records necessary to document Federal activities, establish Government ownership of records, and provide the exclusive legal procedures for the disposition of records.”¹⁰ Such concerns, growth in the amount of government records and the range of records responsibilities defined by the records act, led to the development of a system of regional records centers and field archives, serving as models for institutional and commercial records centers.¹¹ The Second Hoover Commission, in 1953–1955, focused on “paperwork management” and new programs for directives management, reports management, paperwork quality control, and clerical work measurement. This included the publication of the first *Guide to Record Retention Requirements in 1955*, thereafter published annually and still used by records managers and archivists in government and non-government organizations. Key developments in recordkeeping technologies can also be tracked, to some degree, by various amendments to the Federal Records Act. Supplements in 1976 stressed paperwork reduction and documentation of recordkeeping practices, as well as an emphasis on life cycle management.¹²

The revised Federal Records Act was reaffirmed by the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980. The latter introduced information resources management and built

on the 1977 Commission of Federal Paperwork Report, citing the mismanagement of information resources while estimating \$100 billion annual expenditures on data collection, paperwork, and information handling activities. The 1980 act stated that federal managers were to have standard information policies and practices with assurance of confidentiality, and it gave the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) responsibility to set up federal information policies, principles, standards, and guidelines. The most important work of the OMB was the issuance in 1985 of Circular A-130, drafted to meet its information policy mandate. The policy circular was controversial in that it stressed economic criteria, cost avoidance, and reduction in information and information technology management, including exhorting federal managers to use commercial services and to impose user charges where appropriate.¹³

Modern records management principles, the development of essential functions like scheduling and the beginning of the evolution of records management into information resources management, materialized in the years between 1943 and 1985. But to interpret this as *all* there is to records management's origins, generally the opinion among currently practicing records managers, is to undermine *both* the importance of records and their management. Why would records managers hold to an abbreviated history of records, recordkeeping, and records management? Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs provides a clue: "Each individual who enters a profession must, when he learns to apply certain practical rules, open himself to this sensibility that may be called the corporate spirit, and which resembles the collective memory of the professional group."¹⁴ Most records managers have bought into a kind of corporate thinking about their origins, one that has been set in place by the field's standard textbooks. There may be other reasons. The problem with the history may stem from the fact that records management has been primarily associated with business and government. Another standard records management text states that "prior to 1950, formally integrated records management programs were unknown to most business people.... Except for a handful of managers in the federal government ... little effort was made to exercise control over the massive volume in offices throughout the country."¹⁵ This pushes out of the picture earlier and some quite important efforts to manage records.

Another problem may be the generally non-historical perspective of both archivists and records managers. The records management literature is virtually devoid of historical writings, and the historical literature is very uneven in the archives field even if it is far superior to that found in records management, a topic which will be discussed later in this volume.¹⁶ Despite many individuals entering the archives and records management field with solid educational backgrounds in history and the humanities, few seem predisposed to consider the history of records and recordkeeping, organizational recordkeeping systems, and archival repositories and the archival discipline.¹⁷ Even some of the most influential and generally reliable archival historians and theoreticians have suffered

from a kind of present-mindedness, as evident in Rosalind Thomas's critique of Ernst Posner's classic work on ancient archives.¹⁸

This same problem can be seen in Duranti's two-part article on the history of records management, contending the "key to an understanding of the history of records management [as being] the analysis of the function of records managers, of their contribution to societal life and to its development." Duranti argues that "perhaps our future is in our past, within the stone walls of a medieval university where scholars debated about records creation and records forms, and the study of the old science of diplomatics could constitute the foundation of the new *science* of records management."¹⁹ While there is nothing wrong with looking for the historical origins of the present discipline, as does this book, Duranti may go too far in believing that concepts and practices developed hundreds of years before provide the *foundation*, indeed the *only* acceptable foundation, for dealing with modern records systems. Theory and methodology, in such a view, become too static. What is lost is the sense of the challenges of modern records and recordkeeping systems, the need for new solutions to these challenges, and a process that brings together older, trusted procedures with new technologies and techniques. That some records managers and archivists have taken pioneers such as Hilary Jenkinson and T. R. Schellenberg as the only reliable authorities for working with electronic records reveals how deeply engrained such a view has become for some. In careers that spanned from the First World War until the 1960s, these two records professionals wrote much that remains valuable, but it is also true that they so far predated modern recordkeeping systems as to have questionable value.²⁰

The image of records and the problems with modern records and recordkeeping systems may have become a distracting issue in how records professionals view themselves and their history. The media tend to view records and paperwork management as an *evil* condition of modern society. Herbert Gans writes that "'waste' is always an evil, whatever the amount; the mass of paperwork entailed by bureaucracy is a frequent story, and the additional paperwork generated by attempts to reduce the amount of paperwork is a humorous item that has appeared in the news with regularity over the years."²¹ This has potential repercussions for records professionals since, according to Gans, the "'news media's primary purpose is to inform the audience; but elected and appointed officials are, by all odds, the most intensely interested news audience. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and a handful of other print media are, among other things, intragovernmental organs of communication—professional newsletters for public officials."²² With the media filling up their newspapers with stories suggesting the *burden* of records, the importance of properly managing records for crucial purposes such as accountability is lost or, at least, minimized.

Believing that records management is only a development of the past half century is far too simplistic. Examinations of various state records laws and records activities reveal a more checkered history. In New York, there was much

debate over establishing a records office in the early twentieth century that, even with a serious fire in 1911 in the state capital building, led only to a central authority for managing local government records. In New York, there was no law for the disposition of state records until 1951 and no state archives agency until 1978, but one cannot understand or appreciate *why* this occurred until all the other efforts to manage public records on the state and local levels are examined.²³ Records professionals may focus on the more recent developments because there is some truth about the fact that records management is a *modern* sensibility. A recent inquiry into the issues related to personal privacy in our modern era indicates that “we have replaced watching each other at firsthand with keeping track of each other at a distance. Federal recordkeeping is a twentieth-century development. It was not until after 1930 that even 90 percent of births and deaths in the United States were recorded. There was no such thing as a passport before 1914, and in fact, it was not regularly required during peacetime until the fifties. Only in the mid-forties did the government start using Social Security numbers as identification numbers on government files.”²⁴

There are other indicators of the distinct nature of modern recordkeeping that should encourage records professionals to consider a much larger and more complicated historical context to their work. As the telephone became established in the early decades of the twentieth century, it began a process of significant change in personal and business communication and documentation. This included a shift “in favor of telephone conversation, the change urged by the relative expense of writing, copying, and filing correspondence compared to telephoning, which is therefore cheaper and also offers the presumed advantage of immediate dialogue.” This led to problems such as making “preparation for the business or research conversation ... less disciplined, more relaxed and improvisational (often, in fact, sloppier) than the composition of a letter or memorandum. And the fact that the correspondence won’t be on record makes it easy for the conversationalists to drift toward vagary and unintentional compromise or misstatement, only to misremember and misreport their positions and statements as much firmer and tougher after the fact than they actually were during the call.”²⁵ Perhaps we need to look more critically at the impact of records and recordkeeping on every dimension of individual and organizational life and culture, as this passage on the telephone indicates. Material culture specialists see four forms of furniture which have long been part of homes in Europe and America—the seat, to sit on; the table, to eat from or work on; the box or chest, to put things in; and the bed, for sleeping.²⁶ The chair, table, and chest, in one way or another, can be connected to personal recordkeeping and efforts to administer such records. Records may be misunderstood because they are so integrated into our everyday life.

THE FAILURE OF THE RECORDS PROFESSIONS IN UNDERSTANDING THE PAST

Today, many lament the loss of historical perspectives in library and information science education, practice, and the information professions. Educator Donald G. Davis, Jr. asks, “Where do the values that have informed us for millennia have a place—or do they at all?”²⁷ It is ironic that American records professionals face a similar challenge, given the long-term tradition of history in this field and the many professionals who have such educational backgrounds.²⁸ But they do, perhaps the result of other priorities, an educational infrastructure only beginning to focus individuals on archives and records as important topics for study, and a weak self-image minimizing historical scholarship.

At first glance the state of American archival and records management history appears not to be a significant problem. There continues to be published a fair number of histories of archival and records programs and biographies within mainstream professional journals, suggesting all is well. What constitutes archival and records management history is too narrow. There is a lack of broader, more substantive histories of recordkeeping, archival development, and archival theory and practice. There are few in the field who seem able to connect such aspects into a more holistic view of their history. There are even fewer who cross cultures and languages to read about the development of archives worldwide.

In 1983 I noted the need for extensive state histories, institutional histories, regional histories, and a single-volume synthesis.²⁹ All remain needs nearly twenty years later. I discovered when I reviewed the literature in the early 1990s that very little new research had been done, creating little notice among historians.³⁰ The best histories of our National Archives are twenty to thirty years old,³¹ and the most notable efforts to write an overview analysis of historical societies are nearly forty years old.³² There also remains only one comprehensive history of archival development in a single state, and it is more than three decades old.³³ While there have been important new uses of primary sources for smaller studies, there have been few major monographs on archival history topics completed in recent years.³⁴

The genesis of my own research and writing developed as a result of my trying to understand the evolution of archives and records programs I worked in, leading to research conducted for a master’s thesis on the development of early Maryland archives. I worked on this type of research and writing with an assumption that a historical perspective helped me to understand better what I was working on and the context for why things were as they were in the organizations and profession in which I labored. I also drew on my own experience to write a rationale for the value of archival history.³⁵ While this essay has always been favorably commented on and cited,³⁶ it has not led to an upsurge of interest in the archival community for archival history. In hindsight, it may

be that such a *practical* emphasis led to a very internally focused inquiry working against broader and more engaging research and scholarship.³⁷

PROMISING DEVELOPMENTS FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH WITHIN ARCHIVY

There are promising signs within the American archival discipline, if not the records management side, regarding research on archival and records history. The expansion of graduate education has led to stronger curriculum with a more serious orientation on research, especially in attracting students with an interest in archives and records to doctoral programs. There have been little, as of yet, contributions to archival history that have had a major impact on the field or on others working in related realms. With what has been done, however, we can see a more sophisticated reliance on and interpretation of sources.³⁸ Moreover, some new developments, such as the creation of bibliographic standards, have led to analyses providing broader (if still applied) historical background of theory and practices.³⁹

There has been a peripheral connection of education to an interest in history. With the emergence of a North American interest in the theoretical approach of diplomatics as a means for understanding records and recordkeeping systems has come a revisiting of older ideas of archival science.⁴⁰ This has led to a rearticulation of archival history. Although not directly connected to American archival history, Richard Brown's essay on a medieval recordkeeper shows the way for future work. Brown argues that archivists must not superimpose modern concepts of records on earlier concerns to manage records, especially as this has been seen in the rebirth of diplomatics as the crux of an archival science. Rather, archivists must be willing to understand the historical development of records management for what it tells us about records, not for what it suggests about the archivist's or records manager's *current* professional image.⁴¹

Other promising trends in research about archival and records management history exist, especially with the steady (if unspectacular in quantity) publication of articles on this topic in the primary North American journals in the field. Since 1990 every other issue of *Archivaria* and one in three issues of the *American Archivist* has an essay on archival history. This does not bode well for understanding American archival history, since many of these essays focus on Europe.⁴² More important, however, has been the trend towards essays reliant on archival sources and those establishing parameters for a more complete understanding of records and archives.⁴³ The American archival profession is also now aging so that it is beginning to see the writing and publishing of memoirs, most notably Robert Warner's account of his effort to lead the National Archives back to an independent agency status. Memoirs have notorious problems in their veracity and utility, but Warner's story is a compelling addition to the rich and troubled history of this institution—an institution that has been intertwined with the historical evolution of the American archival profession.⁴⁴ Even with these

encouraging aspects, however, it is readily obvious that American archival history is a weak link in the professional chain.

GLIMPSES FROM OUTSIDE

What is not a weak link, however, is the growing interest by those outside the archival and records profession in the historical evolution of writing, records, recordkeeping, archives, and historical sources. This interest is emerging in studies on the history of literacy, public memory, the culture wars, and the computer's societal impact.

The historical study of literacy has become a prime source of understanding how recordkeeping systems have emerged. Archivists first became aware of this area of scholarship twenty years ago when M. T. Clanchy published his work on the origins of records systems in medieval England, a far-reaching and pioneering study bridging the gap between orality and writing and implying what was occurring in contemporary society with computers.⁴⁵ While much of this scholarship may seem irrelevant to the American archivist because it concerns either ancient or medieval notions of literacy and writing, the scholarship also reaffirms more recent notions of records as transactions or challenges many of the assumptions made about the origins of archives. At the least, scholarship in this area has led to some major re-assessments about writing with more detail about how records represent writing systems.⁴⁶ Rosalind Thomas's work on Greece and Rome, for example, is a direct confrontation of long-accepted notions of centralized government archives.⁴⁷ The recreation of the medieval notion of recordkeeping because of the renewed interest in diplomatics as a core component of archival science is certainly challenged in studies by individuals such as Patrick Geary who demonstrate how unsystematic these early recordkeepers seemed to be.⁴⁸ More directly relevant are the works by David Cressy on English literacy in the era of American colonization. Cressy provides an interesting perspective on document formation, the uses of communication, and the power of records and information in Tudor, Elizabethan, and Stuart England—all supporting a fuller understanding of early American recordkeeping.⁴⁹

The studies of historical literacy have challenged stereotypical notions of the evolution of writing and records. In essays on “alternative literacies” in Mesoamerica and the Andes, a new portrait of non-textual writing and recordkeeping emerges where “in this particular Amerindian writing tradition, a pictorial system is better suited to an environment where a multitude of often unrelated languages is spoken, allowing communication across language boundaries. By nature, alphabetic writing systems lack this flexibility.”⁵⁰ Such insights help us to re-interpret the development of records and archives, discerning that it is not merely the textual information making them valuable but their role as evidence and symbol.

The larger context for the development of archives may be public memory, a strong new focus for studying the meaning of the past and enriched by inter-

disciplinary research.⁵¹ Archives—both the individual records/collections and the institutional repositories—are clearly a symbolic marker on the landscape. Archives mark the past and are formed by the past, even though much of the scholarship on public memory has avoided specific or in-depth discussion of archives and historical records (see a later chapter for a discussion of this). The scholarship has become so vast and broad-reaching that it is hard not to see it as providing a more substantial framework for understanding at least the cultural significance (there are other significant non-cultural aspects as well) for the origins and subsequent development of archives. A recent study on American popular uses of the past adds much that suggests how and why archives are formed or perceived.⁵²

The passing of time since the Second World War has caused many to write about how other nations are struggling to remember aspects of the horrific acts of their forebears. Some of these works have discussed the manner in which records are or have been used or neglected for such purposes.⁵³ While other wars have spurred on the collecting and preservation of records,⁵⁴ the aftermath of the Second World War has led to a contested context for the meaning of records. Studies about remembering painful past events have much to inform archivists about their origins and nature of their profession and its institutions.⁵⁵ Some of this has led to considerable debate about the meaning and value of archives, from the Civil War to exhibitions on the end of the Second World War.⁵⁶ Ironically, this contested past, as in the interpretation and memory of the Second World War, has also been tied to developments suggesting the importance of records in general and archives in particular. This has been most evident in the controversy surrounding the role of the Swiss banks in financing Adolf Hitler and the generations of efforts to lay claims to assets stolen from Holocaust victims.⁵⁷ The result has been a powerful new social warrant moving archives from dusty bins visited by scholars to the front pages of newspapers and on the table before public policymakers. This suggests a different kind of archival history. If studies on historic preservation can put it into broader uses by certain societal elements to fulfill a particular mandate (such as “to prompt Americans—newcomer and native alike—to accept their aesthetics, work harder, live more humbly, and appreciate Yankee traditions”⁵⁸), we also need studies showing the factors leading to the origins and ongoing development of archives and historical records repositories.

The association of public memory and archives is even more complex. There has been an uneven reception about the importance of archives in public memory. One study about how Watergate has been perceived brings no discussion of the Presidential Records Act or of the legal wrangles and hassles over the ownership of the Nixon White House tape recordings,⁵⁹ despite a public fascination with such secret recordkeeping.⁶⁰ Another study argues how the personal accounts by journalists have become the de facto societal archives for remembering and interpreting the assassination of John F. Kennedy.⁶¹ What has been lost is an appreciation that there is a need to study the formation of presidential