

“Landscapes of the Past: Archivists, Historians and the Fight for Memory”

Public Lecture

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**by
Terry Cook
Archival Studies Program
University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada**

Hola! Good afternoon. Thank you so very much, to the Director, for your kind words of introduction, and for this special invitation to talk to you today. It is a very special honour for me to come to Spain, with its incredibly rich archival heritage and its very active archival community. I personally want to thank my sponsors for this visit: the Ministry of Culture, the National Archives, the University of Salamanca, and the Archival Association for Castille and Leon. And thank you all for coming here this afternoon to hear me.

Two disclosures first. I speak to you as a Canadian archivist, and so bring to this talk concepts and assumptions about archives that have evolved in theory and practice in Canada, and more broadly the English-speaking world. And I speak too from the “total archives” tradition, where archives in Canada acquire and preserve the records of their sponsoring or parent government and personal and private-sector records that relate to the same jurisdiction.

Today I want to explore the landscapes of the past, the spaces where archivists and historians struggle with memory, fight with memory, where they see archival records differently. The “archive,” please note the singular word, in almost all the recent postmodern discussion in many academic disciplines, including historians, that “archive” is largely perceived as discourse, metaphor, symbol or manifestation of power, as a site of human inscription and intentionality, and of contested memory. Almost no attention is paid by these scholars, however, to the real people (archivists) working in real institutions (archives – note the plural word), and the fact that archivists vary in time and location, with their own disciplinary and professional sets of assumptions, beliefs, theories, strategies, methodologies, and procedures that continually shape and re-shape the nature of the archival record and the archives’ overall collections. The “archive” (singular) of society is not simply found in “archives” (plural). That archive is

very significantly shaped and changed by archivists. Despite this recent and very impressive external theorizing about the archive, from those academics outside the archives, what is still missing in that postmodern discourse is the voice of the archivist on the “inside,” who is, after all, the principal actor in defining, choosing, constructing the archive that remains, and then representing and re-presenting that surviving archival trace to researchers.

Of course, you all know that the archives as institutions and the archives as records can be very political, and very much the source of public debate. The controversy right here in Spain over the movement of a portion of the records relating to the activities occurring in Catalonia, during the Spanish Civil War, from the established Civil War archives in Salamanca to another in Barcelona, is but one example. The power of the record to be part of public discourse in recent times has likewise been shown in the cases of the Stasi files of the former East Germany or the FBI files in the United States, the secret police files of the Iraq and Cambodia, the records of the apartheid regime in South Africa seen through its famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission, or the fire-bombing of the national library in Sarajevo in the 1990s, with the deliberate intention to destroy its priceless collections of medieval and early modern manuscripts to undermine the morale of an entire nation.

Moving from the present-day controversies to the past, historians have been making archives the subject for sustained historical inquiry for the past fifteen years or so, and suggesting in this work that there has always been a disputed politics of archival memory. In this approach, the “archive” is seen as reflecting those institutions that had the power (and resources) to articulate through written records and visual images their view of the world, and that, not surprisingly, they used these recording tools to order, control, name, map, depict, count, and classify that world in ways that reflected their own assumptions and values and that reinforced their own power, status, and control, and at the same time marginalized or silenced those groups that disagreed with them. Of course they also had the power and motivation (and resources) to preserve those records, which was no small feat over centuries, as archives to best serve as evidence of the seeming naturalness of their own hegemony.

This postmodern analysis of the archive has also attracted the attention of many archivists in the English-speaking world trying to explore what these new perspectives means for archivists working inside archives. Most of you will know that I had the honour of working with Luis Hernandez Olivera to gather some of the best of this kind of archival writing together, in translation, in a book, which appeared in 2007 in Tabula, entitled *Combates por la memoria: Archivistica de la postmodernidad*. Those essays addressed the nature of the postmodern archives from the perspective of archival theory. Today, I want to look at it through the lense of archival history, the history of archives and archival ideas, and especially the interaction of historians and archivists and how they influenced each other, and why we now need change.

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The story from “inside” the archives is itself historical. That story or history presents a gradual transformation of the archivist over the past century from passive keeper or custodian guarding the documents of the past to active mediator self-consciously shaping society’s collective memory for purposes well beyond traditional historical research: protecting citizen and human rights, addressing state abuses and promoting justice, documenting environmental changes and global warming, allowing for effective administration based on continuity and precedent, underpinning accountability and thus democracy, opening doors in science, medicine, engineering, and architecture, stimulating the performing and creative arts, restoring aboriginal entitlements, and so much more.

The great stumbling block of misunderstanding, historically, between the notion of “archive” and the reality of “archives” centres around the concept of “objectivity,” and several key mythologies or stereotypes associated with that term. These objectivity myths see the archives as natural and organic residues of human activity, the archivists as passive, neutral, and custodial, the archival documents as a result of being so curated thus trustworthy as authentic and reliable evidence. In short, we archivists are perceived as the caretakers of an uncontested and non-problematic documentary terrain, once a record crosses the archival threshold.

The notion of archives as objective originated with professional historians of the nineteenth century undertaking what they saw as a new scientific approach to history. The new professional history, tied to the university graduate seminar and best represented by Leopold von Ranke in Germany, tried to re-create life in the past “as it really was,” by employing a self-consciously objective methodology of examining exhaustively all relevant archival sources. As one recent scholar of the new professional history notes, “Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. ...Whatever patterns exist in history are ‘found,’ not ‘made.’” Archives were not mediated filters, but clear, unsoiled windows to see the past as it really was.

The father of modern scientific “objective” history, Leopold von Ranke, made this connotation very explicit: he described an archival collection he was using to find these facts as “absolutely a virgin. I long for the moment I have access to her ... whether she is pretty or not.” A nineteenth-century French historian, approaching archives to do research, spoke of being determined “to force open the doors and thrust past the keepers of the harem.” A team of French historians wrote, on finding untouched archival documents, that “every discovery induces rapture.” The need by historians, for methodological, epistemological, and gender reasons, to have a non-problematic, pure, virginal archive, ready for the historian to discover and exploit its facts, almost by definition required the archivist to be an invisible caretaker, a docile handmaiden, the harem-keeper of the documentary virgins. Of course, the new professional historians

did not take archival texts at face value: diplomatics, palaeography, and source criticism were used to test the veracity of the content, dating, and authorship of individual documents, but with no apparent concern about the archival thinking, values, and processes that placed these documents within an archives and before the historian.

This tradition continues to our day, where even sensitive historians rarely confront the mediated, interpreted, contested nature of archives as institutions and as professional activity. Symptomatic of this blindness is the marginalization of discussion of archival sources by most English-speaking historians to introductions, prefaces, or postscripts in their books, or the convention of consigning archival source references to footnotes or endnotes – that is, at the bottom, or at the back – rather than inserted directly into the text, as is the citation method in almost every other social science discipline. Brien Brothman, a prominent Canadian archival theorist, suggests that this marginalization may in fact be an unconscious recognition by historians that “the distancing, the spacing, between archives and history” is essential to the “empowering” traditional discourses of both professions. and that, if transgressed, would threaten, in Brothman’s phrase, “the purity of each other’s intentions, each other’s object(ivity)....”

A leading Canadian historian illustrates my point. In a very fine reflective essay in the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1995, Joy Parr cautioned her colleagues that historical interpretation begins not when they write their texts, but long before, from the moment the historian opens the box in the archival reading rooms. In that archival box, the historian chooses to read only certain files, to focus only on certain authors or groups or regions, to take notes or photocopies of only certain documents, and then imposes on these chosen, privileged documents the further limitation of a particular narrative and interpretative framework. That is true, yet the situation is considerably more serious. I would assert that a major act of historical interpretation – perhaps the major act – occurs not when the historian opens the box, but when the archivist fills the box, and, by implication, through the process of archival appraisal, destroys the other 98 or 99 per cent of records that do not get into that box, or any other archival box. And, further, what of the layers of archival arrangement and description – and the hidden assumptions and methods and procedures underpinning these processes – that lead the historian, or not, to the 1 or 2 per cent of all surviving records found in that or other archival boxes; and highlight, or do not, the complex interrelationships among creators of records, organizational cultures, record communication patterns, and the record-shaping characteristics of information technologies and recording media, from engraving to photography to computing? All these filters are based on the depth, quality, and presentation of the archivist’s own research into the records’ many and continually altering contexts and on his or her own social/cultural attitudes – into, in short, the records’ own history and the archivist’s need or desire to unravel that history as the very foundation of all archival functions and processes.

This ever-evolving history of records – and of archivists’ continual interventions and mediations with them – is the great silence between archivists and historians. It forms the large gulf between those who theorize the archive (singular) and those who work in

real archives (plural). I want to explore this broad assertion by outlining in a very general way the differing assumptions, ideas, and decisions, historically, in archivists' thinking, by suggesting the contrasts between the pioneering period of archival theory up to around 1930 and the more recent formulations by archivists in the past two decades. I hope that the historically contingent nature of archives, and thus of the resulting archive, will thereby be demonstrated. I am aware that contrasting in this way the traditional and the postmodern is rather too stark, and that there were intervening phases, as well as blurred lines across time where some pioneers anticipated the future and no few contemporary archivists look backward with longing to earlier times, and of course there are great variations based on national traditions, first and third world realities, public official records and personal private ones, text and image and orality. I am starting a dialogue and an interrogation of these issues, not ending it!

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Traditional archival theory was first articulated in nineteenth-century Europe, after centuries of informal development, and then exported around the world. This articulation exactly paralleled the emergence of history as a university-based discipline and academic profession; indeed, almost all the early professional archivists were trained by the new historians at such universities and shared the same scientific mentality of the new historians. Influenced by the assumptions and demands of the new, allegedly objective, fact-based history, as well as by contemporary Darwinian thinking and metaphors, the pre-1930 archival pioneer thinkers asserted that records were the lifeblood of organizations, that those eventually coming to archives were a kind of natural, organic residue left over from administrative processes, which residue the archivist then kept in pristine original order and represented in hierarchical provenance in the archival building and in archival finding aids, so that historians could find there, almost like geologists found fossils in rock sediments, the past as it really happened. Such Darwinian thinking and metaphors reinforced the notion of a naturally formed archive, with that "naturalness" of course being essential to the assumptions of the new historians. Sir Hilary Jenkinson of the Public Record Office, the first great English-language archival theorist, even entitled a major portion of his famous 1922 Manual, "the evolution of archives," and compared (as did the authors of the famous Dutch manual in 1898) the archivist to a palaeontologist when building the "backbone" of a "skeleton" of archival arrangement. In this naturalized Darwinian world, appraisal by the archivist – that is, the selection of only a small portion of archives from the whole of recorded information -- was seen as anti-archival, for the inevitably subjective values of the appraising archivist would do violence to the organic character of the evolved archive, wrenching records from their original context and their original order of creation. Rather, Jenkinson cautioned the archivist to approach records "without prejudice or afterthought," claiming that the archivist in so doing is "the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces." And so we get the oft-repeated assertions of the archivist's objectivity and neutrality, that the archivist must work diligently, but quietly,

behind the scenes, disturbing these original orders and organic residues as little as possible, to serve the shared professional mythologies of both historians and archivists.

But what did the archivists inside real archives actually do in this period of alleged objectivity and neutrality? Just as many of the early professional historians focussed their historical research and writing on the political, legal, constitutional, and economic character of the nation state, so too were the first articulations of professional archival principles strongly biased in favour of the state. Almost all the classic books about archival methodology were written by senior staff members of national archives in Europe. Not surprisingly, most of these books focussed on government, public, or corporate records and their orderly transfer to archival repositories to preserve their original order and classification; and most relegated private and personal archives to the purview of libraries and librarians. Why, we might ask ourselves, are personal archives (and archivists) not part of most countries' national archives? Why are those who look after government records in archives called archivists and those who look after personal records in libraries usually called manuscript curators or special librarians, with a whole range of connotations and assumptions tied to each term? Why are archivists of textual records just called "archivists," but those of maps, photographs, painting, or film are called "media archivists," as if paper text is not also a medium? Why until recently were oral stories and oral memory not considered an archival medium at all? These fundamental historical divisions within the internal organization of archival memory, inside archives, between public and private, and between text and images, between written and oral, are alone stark evidence that the archival endeavour, as formulated, practised, and codified by the pioneers, was hardly as value free as they may have hoped.

These early archival theorists also worked in an era of relative document scarcity. Their professional experience was based on dealing with limited numbers of medieval or early modern documents susceptible to careful diplomatic analysis of each page, or with records found in well-organized, highly centralized, departmental registry systems of the emerging nineteenth-century modern nation state. Functions of government in such nineteenth-century administrations were limited, focussed, and placed in stable hierarchical structures, where one office equalled one function. These realities around scarcity reinforced the archivist pioneers' objectivist, curatorial mindset and his or her inclination to dismiss the appraisal function of modern archives. There simply was no need for selection, as every surviving scrap of recorded information from the Middle Ages or early modern Europe was preserved. Rather, very old records were rescued from towers, dungeons, and basements, and placed carefully on the archival pedestal. More modern records came to archives from government departments as a "natural" residue of administrative processes. This "residue" approach favoured retaining as archives the policy or legal or senior-level material most important to the government officials making such "residue" forming decisions of what was left over, and ignored more transient case files where citizens interacted with the state at the "bottom" of the classic hierarchical pyramid of organizational structure. State officials, not archivists, decided which modern records would survive by a process of winnowing the wheat from

the chaff, according to administrative and political needs; when the old “wheat” was no longer needed for even internal government reference purposes, these surviving records were transferred over to the archival institution. This process was characterized by a very long separation in time between the currently active (and even long-dormant) records still under government administrative control and those that were centuries old and held by the archives. The records themselves were viewed as reflections of the structures (and the activities therein) that caused them to be created. They were to be preserved impartially, therefore, as evidence of the activities of the single office that created them.

Obviously, this approach was anything but the impartial or objective stance claimed for it, for this approach sanctioned the already strong predilection of archives and archivists, as institutions and employees of the nation state, to support mainstream culture and to showcase its most powerful records creators. Such approaches, not surprisingly, produced collections that privilege the official narratives of the state over the documented stories of individuals and groups in society, or even of the citizens’ interaction with the state, which usually occurs at the level of the case-file transaction. Until the 1950s, the emphasis was, moreover, on the records of the legal, constitutional, fiscal, military, and foreign policy dimensions of the nation state, and much less on its social, natural resource, environmental, or cultural programs. Until well into the 1970s and beyond, the traditional approach privileged policy records over operational records, let alone individual transactional-level case files. This statist approach to defining archives evidently also marginalizes purely personal papers, for these were placed, as I have already noted, outside the purview of European national archives entirely, a pattern mirrored around the world, with some happy exceptions. The archival rules for determining the evidential qualities and authenticity of records, and thus their “value” as evidence, also reflected the state archives’ perspectives on (and thus naturalized assumptions about) well-organized, centrally controlled, and officially sanctioned government records. This approach not surprisingly also favoured textual documents, from which such rules were first derived, at the expense of other media, especially audio-visual media, for experiencing and recording the present, for determining therefore the best archives to view the past.

The positivist and “scientific” values permeating such thinking inhibited archivists then, and since, from developing and documenting multiple ways of seeing and knowing and describing their records; archivists are similarly disinclined from acknowledging and displaying multiple and confused provenances, or migrations and integration of records over time and of their creators and their activities. Rather, an “original order” (a classic and cardinal archival principle) was sought and imposed, and then enshrined, in archival arrangement, and then reflected in the descriptive finding aids presented to researchers, rather than allowing several orders or even disorders to exist among records in archives. Records or series of records following archival descriptive standards and rules are arranged and described in very detailed general-to-specific hierarchies to reflect their original placement in the creating agency’s administrative

hierarchy; each record series is placed by archivists in one such administrative hierarchical fonds, and (by current descriptive standards) in one fonds only. Archivists thereby have traditionally masked all the messiness of records (and their creating entities) from researchers, presenting instead a well-organized, rationalized, monolithic view of a record collection (or archival fonds) that very often never existed that way in operational reality with its original creator or creators. The “archive” is offered (and promoted) as trustworthy evidence of actions, accurate mirrors of acts and facts, frozen in time, in reliable original orders, unaltered contexts, fixed descriptive groups, kept impartially by archivists, so that the “Truth,” as Jenkinson put it, and traditional positivist “scientific” historians hoped, could be found in such preserved, pristine, virginal records.

In short, what scholars of the archive would find, what historians would find, if they were to examine the footprints left by archivists performing their functions inside archives, even by my superficial tour this afternoon, is a whole series of heavily mediated filters that govern how records first are chosen to come to archives, and then are re-presented to researchers by archivists in various kinds of physical orders and in varying intellectual patterns in the finding aids and research guides. The neutral, impartial archive of classic archival theory, is, in reality, a place of order, control, hierarchy, elites, colonialism, and patriarchy, reflecting the power of the state that called it into existence and continues to pay the bills.

But what happens if the very societal basis for this traditional archival mindset is now no longer relevant, or just plain wrong? What if, as has happened increasingly over the past century, function and structure no longer coincide in neat Weberian fashion, so that now we have ever-shifting organizations that are multi-functional, even virtual, where work tasks and structural lines blur continually, yet archivists insist on attaching records to one single organizational entity in the descriptive finding aids that researchers use as their principal entrée to records in archives? What happens, as recent research studies have shown, if the official centralized registry of records never operated in that Weberian way at all, the dream stymied even in Jenkinson’s day within the British Treasury at the heart of his own government, by informal conventions, localized practices, social expectations, and cultural norms? What happens when organizational cultures and discourses are now transformed from vertical to horizontal, from controlling to collaborative, from hierarchy to networks, from executive fiat to internal consensus, with records created in these new milieus following along accordingly? What happens when records are managed on desktops by thousands and millions of end-users in these new fluid organizations and not in some centralized, ordered, and controlled manner, if ever they were that? What happens when the record-creating universe moves from a paradigm of scarcity and survival of ancient manuscripts to an avalanche of paper: it was estimated that each government records archivist in the 1990s at the then-National Archives of Canada – just in terms of paper records alone – appraised at a rate equivalent to thirteen books each and every second in order to choose the 1 or 2 per cent that would survive as the collective archive – and for government files, that’s an analogy to books without indexes, introductions, or summaries on the covers to hint at the contents inside! What happens when there are multiple orders and places and sites

of records, or indeed disorders, rather than one ordered, set, fixed place for each record in this cascading avalanche? What happens when the record itself is now no longer primarily fixed text on paper, but virtual and digital, with images and texts and sounds and voices combined, often interactively, in volumes 10 or 100 times that of the paper avalanche? What, then, happens to archives? What, then is the archive?

The response by archivists to this changing landscape has been at least twofold – and (perhaps not surprising, given the above historical evolution of the profession) very contested within recent archival discourse and published literature, and in actual archival practice. Sadly, a good portion of archivists still adhere to large portions of the traditional professional assumptions, thus rendering it impossible for them to cope with these new record-creating realities, all while they impose increasingly irrelevant orders and filters and rules and models around the records they acquire and present to researchers. More optimistically, another group of archivists are now calling for a complete reinvention of archives to acknowledge that these are contingent places of power and agency that need new concepts and new models to transform them: from modernist to postmodernist, from passive custodial to active interventionist, from hierarchical and exclusionary to networked and inclusive, from inward-looking and secretive to openly transparent and accountable, from dealing at the micro-level with impossible volumes of individual documents to archival decision-making at the macro-level of the records' context and functionality, thus moving the archival focus from records as products or artifacts, to record-making and record-keeping as processes, in the business of living our lives, running our organizations, and telling our human stories.

What might such a transformed archival world look like? That story would take much more time than is available, but here are some minimum expectations that growing numbers of archivists are advocating for shaping the archive in new ways. Appraisal would be more sensitive to the voices of citizens, not just the state, to the marginalized and unsuccessful as much as the accepted and successful, so that archival holdings would become more inclusive and democratic. Relationships with records creators would be repositioned “up front” to influence record inscription rather than passively accepting the residues allowed by the powerful or assigning value based primarily on transient research trends. The focus in all archival activities would be on documenting function, activity, and ideas, rather than primarily reflecting the structures, offices, and persons of origin. Description would be opened up to presenting multiple origins and orders for situating records rather than allowing only one way, one view, and would include extended essays on the richer, deeper contextual elements enveloping the complex creation, uses, and relationships of records over their entire and continuing life (or their history), including after their entry to the holdings of archives. In reference services, archivists would be openly receptive to researchers' insights, leading to an interactive annotation of record descriptions by researchers, as well as thereby nurturing new communities of users. Image and sound would be equally privileged with texts and words; feeling and emotion equally with order and logic; conversation equally with control. The tactile, visceral materiality of records in all media and colours and

tones would be respected along with their informational content. A deeper appreciation everywhere of context, interrelatedness, and difference across all media would be evident, where the records themselves would have detailed continuing histories, ever-evolving, opening up, rather than closed down in fixed frameworks when they cross the archival threshold.

The archivist, finally, would celebrate her or his subjective, mediative role, openly and accountably, as an agent less for buttressing institutional power as one for advancing archives for broader social purposes. The archivist thus becomes the conscious co-creator rather than the neutered caretaker of the archive. In this gradual transformation of the archivist from passive keeper guarding the past to active mediator self-consciously shaping society's collective memory, the archives as institution is changed from an unquestioned storehouse of a history waiting to be found to itself becoming a contested site for identity and memory formation. Because of the need to research and understand the nature of functional-structural context in which records are created, and in which the record-keeping and media-generating processes take place, and to interpret their relative importance as the very basis for modern archival appraisal and description, as well as for making hard, complex, often sensitive choices about preservation, exhibitions, and web-site construction, the traditional notion of the impartial archivist is no longer acceptable -- if ever it was. Archivists inevitably will inject their own values into all such activities, and thus will need to examine very consciously their choices (and the assumptions behind them) in the archives-creating and memory-formation process, and they must leave transparent evidence of their own activity so they may be held accountable.

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A simple and brief conclusion: As the co-creator of the archives, the archivist makes history. We archivists shape society's texts, and are part of its story, not just its footnotes. How we shape that text matters a very great deal, to us, to society, and to our users, especially historians, if they wish to use archives well. To me, this change is worth celebrating, rather than denying or suppressing, so that between the archive and the archives a new dialogue may begin.

Thank you.