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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

ARCHIVES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD. By Ernst Posner. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972. Pp. xviii + 283. Illustrations, map, footnotes, index. \$10.00)

The more things change, the more they remain the same. This adage is well borne out by Ernst Posner's Archives in the Ancient World. Dr. Posner has made a study of the ruins of ancient civilizations along the Tigris-Euphrates and Nile river basins in which he looked particularly at the records and records keeping practices. He describes the tablets, parchments and papyri that have survived. He relates these records to the bureaucracies that created and maintained them. The striking conclusion one arrives at is that a modern administrator would quickly feel right at home were he to be transported by a time machine to ancient days and find himself a governmental official then.

Throughout the book Dr. Posner continues to show that the organizational structures, the administrative functions and even the building floor plans of the ancient governments must be understood in order to comprehend the archival operations. Some readers might conclude that the archivists of those days really were not archivists at all but records managers, inasmuch as the extant evidence seems to indicate that these records custodians were primarily concerned with serving the administrative needs of the government. At the same time, however, the archivists obviously devoted much attention to the preservation, inventory and description of their older records, that is, those records that had outlived their administrative usefulness. We can, therefore, realize a renewed appreciation for the fact that the archivists and the cultures they served had a sense of their own history.

The understanding of the archives of the ancient world which Dr. Posner has given us helps us to widen our knowledge of ancient history. We also learn something about the history of archaeology. Dr. Posner justly laments the fact that until fairly recently archaeologists were not sufficiently aware that the records they uncovered contained a wealth of information and insights that could only be captured if the records were studied in their original archival context. Consequently, the principle of provenance

was ignored. The archival integrity of the record groups and series was destroyed, probably beyond repair.

Dr. Posner is an eminent historian as well as an archivist--probably a necessary combination for the author of a book of this type, and the reader is the beneficiary. Particularly does the twentieth century archivist benefit, because he can, after studying ancient practices, see himself from a new perspective.

Georgia Department of Archives
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J. Harmon Smith



LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CONSERVATION. Ed. by George M. Cunha and Norman P. Tucker. (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1972. Pp. 223. Charts, footnotes, and index. \$10.00)

Most of the information in Library and Archives Conservation, the volume which grew out of the Boston Athenaeum's Seminar in 1971 on the application of Chemical and Physical Methods to the Conservation of Library and Archival Materials, will be of great help to conservationists throughout the world. But there are many erroneous statements which this reviewer, a paper conservationist with over thirty-two-years experience, cannot overlook.

In opening comments, Frazer G. Poole of the Library of Congress rightly suggests caution in accepting commercial products and services. "There are many waiting in the wings, so to speak, to jump on the preservation bandwagon," he writes. The rule that "nothing should be done that cannot be undone" in restoration procedures must surely be followed. Today we have, in my opinion, too many on this so-called bandwagon who have no formal training in restoration procedures.

The article by James E. Kusterer of the W. J. Barrow research laboratory leads one to believe the Barrow methods of deacidification and lamination were the first and foremost. It is stated also that heat sealing lamination originated at the Bureau of Standards in 1936. But the "Summary Report of Bureau of Standards Research on Preservation of Records" by A. E. Kimberly and B. W. Scribner, issued in October, 1933, describes successful tests of the heat sealing process of lamination with cellulose acetate foil. The National Archives is mentioned at the close of this publication, stating that the wood hydraulic

press was installed in 1935. This process was in use at least one or two years before Dr. Barrow, in 1936, "became aware of the need for a restoration process that would be effective for more than the approximately 20 to 30 years" which was generally the limit for the processes in use at that time.

The papers on the New England Document Conservation Center were very impressive, and one would hope that the proposal to establish similar centers in other parts of the country will be implemented. Congressional appropriations could inaugurate centers either in state archives or federal records centers. These conservation units could work on both federal and state records within their boundaries, as well as materials from libraries and historical societies.

The other papers submitted at this seminar were well written and contain very valuable information for administrators as well as conservators.

It was unfortunate that the National Archives in Washington, D. C., was not represented at this seminar. We continually train archivists and conservationists from almost every country in our restoration procedures.

National Archives and Records Service Wilbur G. Poole



A GUIDE FOR THE WRITING OF LOCAL HISTORY. By John Cumming (Lansing: Michigan American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 1974. Pp. 53. Bibliographical appendix. Free.)

The Michigan American Revolution Bicentennial Commission sponsored the publication of this small volume as a part of that state's celebration of our nation's two hundredth birthday. In a message from the chairman of the Michigan commission, the hope was expressed that this booklet would "provide basic guidelines and suggestions on publishing county histories . . . and that it . . . would serve to stimulate a number of significant projects which will have lasting value." The commission should be commended for these aspirations and this particular effort, and author and archivist John Cumming is to be congratulated for his offering.

While brief in its length, the guide provides many useful suggestions in areas which are important to the

successful research, writing, and publication of local history. There are no chapter divisions per se, but rather brief sections devoted to specific concerns. Among the more than twenty topics are: historical libraries, printed documents, the national archives, oral interviews, pictorial resources, note taking and photography. While the several topics are not uniform in their value, they point out the areas where special care and thought should be exercised in work in the field of local history. In what he calls "Self-appraisal," Cumming wisely cautions careful consideration of one's qualifications as "town historian." Having recommended caution in beginning a local history publication effort, the author proceeds to plot a path which, if carefully followed, should help in the successful completion of the project.

Cumming's treatment of historical libraries applies, of course, to those of Michigan, but his pointers on using these facilities will be useful to Georgians as they approach Georgia collections. The author suggests consideration of such matters as the specialized nature of collections and finding aids available in a given location. The treatment of manuscripts and records is likewise specifically informative for Michigan but also thought provoking for any researcher. One of the more helpful treatments is that of the community newspaper as a source of local historical research. Here one finds tips on locating newspapers, as well as a good, short introduction to the style and contents of pre-Civil War newspapers, changes in newspaper style, and the value of advertising to research.

The author is most candid in his appraisal of the value of personal papers. While most appealing, they are all too frequently little more than collected "weather reports." In an area which has recently been promoted as especially valuable for local research--oral history--the author is disappointingly general in his comments. There are a number of very fine technical publications on the business of oral history which might have been noted. The American Association for State and Local History offers several.

The treatment of maps, atlases and gazetteers is among the most informative in this volume. It includes several good ideas as to what maps reveal about local history. For Michigan the author includes a helpful list of where and when the "birdseye views" (panoramas) were done.

These panoramas were common to most areas of the nation, having been in vogue in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and are especially helpful in depicting the looks of towns in that period.

A large portion of this work is devoted to the writing of local history and the physical details of publishing. While the portions having to do with writing--note taking, determination of the scope of the project, and the like--are especially worthwhile, there is some question as to the need for the great detail about the printing of a work.

The author's bibliographical appendix includes a number of valuable sources and guides, and his use of attractive local history illustrations throughout the work is in itself a source of many good ideas for those approaching the research and writing of local history.

Hopefully, other states will make such guides available as part of their Bicentennial efforts.

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