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Review of Do Archives Have Value?

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Michael Moss and David Thomas, eds. *Do Archives Have Value?* London: Facet, 2019.

This is an “interesting” book, in all the possible connotations of the adjective. The title itself is interesting: while it uses the term “archives” to refer to documents as well as institutions and programs, it uses the word “value” to refer to use as well as worth, and the question mark introduces doubt, suggesting that the value of archives is questionable. Regardless, the editors state that the book “does provide a framework to assist in the development of a case for funding that is not simplistic and draws on several streams of thought and cultural contexts” (xvii). The book addresses the value of archives in ten chapters written by authors from five continents. Although most chapters focus on value to those who fund archival institutions and programs, value to society is often implied and occasionally expressed. The introduction, authored by the editors, clearly contextualizes the chapters, not only within the book but also within each author’s circumstances.

Chapter 1, authored by Paul Lihoma, director of the National Archives of Malawi, discusses the value of oral and written texts during the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods in Malawi. It shows how written documents were introduced into an illiterate society by the colonial administration as a means of control. At the same time, the issuing of tax receipts allowed Malawi natives to demonstrate their rights by showing them to the authorities. The chapter outlines the history of access to public records from the moment they were first open to the public in 1951 by the colonial administration, through periods of extreme restrictions during the nation’s one-party regime, until the establishment by the Malawi Constitution of a National Compensation Tribunal in 1994, at which time the archives finally began to be used to ensure accountability for human rights violations. This is a clear example of how archives can have value both as instruments of oppression and abuse and as means of liberation and justice, depending on who controls them. Thus, value is not intrinsic to the archives but to their use.

The second chapter, coauthored by Nancy Bell, Getty Conservation Scholar, and the book editors, based on a project supported by the National Archives of the United Kingdom, discusses a research project jointly carried out by the British National Archives and Northumbria University i-School “to understand how to demonstrate the value of documentary heritage and the social and economic impact that can be realised from the services offered” (19). Here the authors look at the value of archives through a variety of lenses: economic, social, intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional. This is followed by a brief discussion of how to capture value through building models to demonstrate the contributions of services offered by the heritage sector. Clearly, the complexity of the value of documentary heritage does not allow for easy demonstration or assessment through simple descriptive and evaluative tools.

Next, Helen Morgan, Cate O’Neill, Gavan McCarthy, and Annelie De Villiers of the eScholarship Research Centre of the University of Melbourne and Nikki Henningham, a feminist historian specializing in oral history projects for the National Library of Australia, present an Australian perspective on “re-contextualization,” reflecting on the value that archival work may add or detract from the material that is the object of its care (38). Their essay considers three case studies to demonstrate the community significance of case files and fragmentary records, which are usually considered of no value by archival institutions. Rather, the authors argue, such material serves as substantial documentary evidence to the communities to which they relate.

Chapter 4, authored by Sarah Tyacke, former chief executive of the British National Archives, discusses the work of the Hillsborough Independent Panel, set up in 2010 to investigate the events that led to the death of ninety-six people in Sheffield Stadium on April 15, 1989, the so-called Hillsborough Disaster. The mandate of the panel was to establish the historical truth. The key result was a digital archives, the Hillsborough Archive website, of all existing information, with the idea of keeping the originals where they belong and their copies in a “Distributed Digitised Archive combining the central government records transferred to the National Archives (TNA) at Kew and the local records transferred to Sheffield and to Liverpool Archives and to other places of deposit as appropriate” (70). While at the time of writing the website was not accessible, now it is at <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C14176659>.

The fifth chapter, authored by Sachiko Morimoto, associate professor at the University of Tokyo Archives, outlines the history of modern archives in Japan, starting from the ancient tradition of official history compilations imported from China, through the Japanese compilations executed by imperial order, to the creation of the first institutional archives in 1959. This chapter links the absence of an archival system in Japan to the fact that any such system is underpinned by democratic ideas and has no place in an imperial government. However, lower levels of government, as well as businesses, maintain archives for the compilation of their own histories, which help “community members to find their own identity” and gives them a feeling of belonging. “This is why official histories need to be compiled by the organizations themselves and not by individual historians” (85).

Chapter 6, by Swapan Chakravorty, professor in the humanities at Presidency University in Kolkata, India, outlines the history of archives in India from the colonial period to liberation before focusing on the National Archives of India after the transfer of power in 1947. The National Archives was responsible for public records, but there were many archives in India, accumulated by the nobility, religious orders, and princely states. Nonetheless, the author claims that the newly minted National Archives, designed according to Western criteria, was able to “effectively combat native divisiveness and privilege” (97). The new institution, built on the foundation of the Imperial Records Department, the purpose of which was to “construct history for the colonised people,” became the means of constructing “the memory of the future” by declassifying secret files and using the data as a means of redress, reparation, and freedom (99).

Pui-Tak Lee, a professor at Central China University and the University of Hong Kong, discusses the history of business archives in Hong Kong since it became a British colony in 1841 in the seventh chapter. British firms had a long tradition of preserving archives and publishing anniversary books based on them, and Chinese firms started to do the same in 1919, because they were small, not listed on the stock market, and family owned, and the entrepreneurs running them were more interested in advertising themselves writing their own biographies than these companies. In the 1980s and 1990s, when all these companies became international and listed, they built up their archives and started commissioning research. Accordingly, businesses hold the bulk of Hong Kong archives because most public records were destroyed during World War II. Their key records are account books, because their purpose is not to show gains and losses but “to keep track of human relationships, building up social networks” (108). Thus, even if government

agencies have their own archives, in the absence of an archival law, they do not have the “value” that the business archives have for understanding and maintaining the fabric of Hong Kong society.

Chapter 8, authored by Louise Craven, former head of cataloguing at the British National Archives, examines the value of personal memory as reconstituted through texts in the digital environment. Her essay discusses different types of memories supported by the so-called memory-institutions and distinguishes collective memory (a social construct) from individual memory (the act of remembering). It then analyzes the memory studies developed during the digital revolution and the work of influential thinkers on the matter, as well as user studies conducted by archival institutions. It concludes that personal memory in the archives is not measurable at this time and calls for a study that can bridge the intrinsic value of archives and their instrumental value as evidence.

In chapter 9, book editors David Thomas and Michael Moss, respectively emeritus professor and visiting professor at the University of Northumbria, England, discuss the impact of the development of commercial family history websites on archival institutions. Their chapter explores the explosion of family history, the use of computers to analyze genealogical records, the publication of the results, and the business models of Ancestry.com, Findmypast, and other such companies. The chapter reports on the income derived by archives from these developments, as well as related declines in the numbers of users of archives’ own websites. It also considers these businesses’ impact on the family history community, on family history societies, and on the public sector from an international perspective. The chapter closes with a reflection on the sustainability of the business model linking family history companies and archives now that many key records are available on websites and these businesses are moving to other activities such as DNA testing.

Chapter 10, authored by Daniel German, archivist at Library and Archives Canada, discusses archives as “the *prima facie* evidence of what has occurred,” as instruments of accountability, and as the primary documenters of transactions, and reflects on the benefits and costs of having archives in a “post-fact” world (168). The author points to the difference between value and worth, and shows how pecuniary considerations are not even comparable to the benefits coming to society from the perception people have of the truthfulness of archives, a perception the author calls “truthiness,” based on Stephen Colbert’s neologism. German concludes that the “future value” of archives “is about getting the facts straight” (187).

The ten chapters are uneven in terms of research, scholarship, depth of analysis, approach to the theme, and writing style. I enjoyed some chapters more than others, based on the content that was either new or most interesting to me (e.g., chapters 5 and 9). In some cases, better copyediting would have helped with the flow of the discourse. However, overall, the book makes for “interesting” reading, and though its “value” is debatable, it is “worth” the time, as everyone will discover in it something informative, stimulating, or leading to new inquiries.