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REVIEW OF EXHIBITION

Uncovering the arcane: Rethinking early modern archives

Liesbeth Corens, Kate Peters & Alexandra Walsham (eds), *Archives & Information in the Early Modern World*. Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2018. xviii + 326 pp. £70.00. ISBN 978-0-19-726625-0 (hb).

Markus Friedrich, trans. John Noël Dillon, *The Birth of the Archive: A History of Knowledge*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018. xi + 284 pp. \$75.00. ISBN 978-0-472-13068-9 (hb).

Behind the etymology of ‘archive’ is a more vexed history than Jacques Derrida (in *Archive Fever*, 1995) would have you believe. Yes, its immediate Latin precedent is the singular neuter noun *archi(v)um*, which gestures both towards the sense of secrecy – *arca*, the arcane, the chest in which something is stored (or hidden) – as well as calling to mind the arks of the Covenant, and of Noah. And, yes, as Derrida and Michel Foucault (in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969) both point out, the ancient Greek *arkheion* (the residence of the ruling magistrate in Ancient Greece, as well as a legal repository) offers the connection between power and the control of documents of which so much has been made. Behind the Vulgate’s Latin translation of Jerome, however – which first made those two ideas of an Ark one word – lie two separate Hebrew words which can be transliterated as *tevat* (Noah’s boat) and *aron* (a consecrated chest). These refer separately to different material objects and, indeed, entirely different concepts. The *archive*, then, as it moved from Hebrew to Latin brought disparate senses together under the same term. These two recently published books both recognize the way that this plurality is integral to the idea of the archive. Approaching the early modern archive from various locations, perspectives and aims, they work successfully within this sense of multiplicity: their archives, far from being pinned down and limited, are explored in a variety of manifestations.

Recent scholarship has seen an ‘archival turn’ across various disciplines, from psychology to history; the ongoing mass digitization of sources, as well as discussions about freedom of information, Eric Ketelaar seems to suggest in his foreword to *Archives and Information in the Early Modern World*, made such a movement inevitable. However, it would be wrong to assume that this turn – which can be summarized as a movement from ‘archives-as-sources to archives-as-subject’ (xvii) – is the same across all the disciplines in which something by that name can be identified. The editors of *Archives and Information*, one of two books which arose from a conference entitled *Transforming Information: Record Keeping in the Early Modern World* held at the British Academy in

2014, stress that their focus on the archive is historical, material and practical. As Alexandra Walsham, Kate Peters and Liesbeth Corens write in their introduction, ‘the validity of the still influential principles articulated by nineteenth-century archival theorists has been decisively questioned and contested by leading figures within the field of archivistics’ (10). Showing their close attention to the impact of this, the editors offer an impressively nuanced collection of essays which pays attention to ‘the dangers of imposing conceptual or historical unity on a multiplicity of unique accumulations’ (2) whilst still offering vital insights about the larger information cultures of the early modern world.

Similarly, Markus Friedrich, whose work here has been translated competently and clearly by John Noël Dillon, makes it clear early on in *The History of the Archive* that he is not interested in a theoretical abstraction at the expense of material or human activity: he warns that ‘the view of archives as a reified institution must not obscure the fact that archives are constituted by countless activities and actions’ (6–7). Accordingly, even at his most conceptual or wide ranging, Friedrich takes pains to ground his discussion through ‘unique stories’ (14). Well researched (and often entertaining) anecdotes – the actions of real people – fill these pages, offering a consistent, gentle rebuke to that abstracted idea of “archivology” within which ‘actual archives generally play no part’ (11). Friedrich instead offers a ‘praxis-orientated history of archives’ (14) populated by, and told through, individuals whose relationships to archives range from the criminal to the institutional, from the pursuit of genealogy to the purely administrative.

The books differ in scope and approach. *Archives & Information* is structured in four parts. The first two, ‘Organisation and Agency’ and ‘Access and Secrecy’, predominantly deal with questions of access and power. The opening essay by Randolph Head makes a case for thinking with the term ‘archivalities’ (30) rather than archives, in order both to locate institutional power within the definition whilst also acknowledging the differences in ‘archive-like’ (32) practices and theories which range across cultures and time periods. Head pays particular attention to the potential Eurocentrism of the idea of the archive, situating his argument substantially within postcolonial thought. It’s a shame that having been so thought-provokingly set up, this focus slides more or less out of view until the final part of the book, where Brooke Sylvia Palmieri turns to the Quaker archives and a preacher named Mary Fisher’s (1623–98) alleged meeting with the ruler of the Ottoman Empire Mehmet IV (1642–93), and Kiri Paramore examines East Asia and ‘the contours of the Sinosphere’ (288). The strength of an edited collection is its range, and it is tantalizing when we finally see beyond Europe, especially when Head makes such a compelling case, and provides a framework, for an approach which sets different archivalities alongside each other without having to make any direct and potentially charged comparisons. It makes for a strong opening chapter, reminding the reader that they may not be free from the loaded assumptions and ideas that come with the ‘still-dominant European paradigms’ of the archive (51).

Filippo de Vivo and Jacob Soll provide two chapters that explore the working practices of archives in early modern Italy and France respectively. De Vivo shows the development of Italian correspondences and record-keeping with exquisite eye to detail: anyone familiar with Ann Blair’s work on ‘information overload’ will appreciate the work done here, especially with its focus on the intensity of labour demanded

by record keeping. 'The toil began growing greater', the superintendent of Venice's Secret Chancery is quoted as writing mournfully (71); what is consistently striking in this overview is how little the information-processing techniques themselves changed as the scale on which they were carried out grew exponentially. Soll, meanwhile, convincingly argues for the previously overlooked 'financial and mercantile' origin of state archives (88) with particular focus on the work of Jean-Baptiste Colbert. His movement out from Colbert's papers and organization to the 'external political concerns' of the French government (98), and therefore the wider structures of early state archives, is exemplary of both of these books, showing how close studies of individual archives can be effectively used to illustrate wider claims and ideas.

The History of the Archive begins with a thorough introduction setting up the scope of the book and its position within the field, before turning to a brief 'prologue' of 'documents'. The book is divided into eight parts, but several subdivisions are given in the contents list for each, making it easy to see at a glance where something is and what surrounds it; whether intentionally or not (and I took it to be deliberate), this helpfully mimics the subject of the second chapter by providing a visual display of an array of ordered knowledge. Is a contents list archive-like? With short, confident titles – 'Documents', 'Founding', 'Projections', 'People', 'Places', 'Power(lessness)', and 'Sources' – Friedrich's work posits itself as neatly ordered. However, as the book itself suggests happens with most archive-like projects, in practice these titles are more descriptive than prescriptive. For instance people are present throughout the book and, given Friedrich's belief that 'activities and actions' make the archive, it would be odd if they weren't. Rather than providing the only sustained examination of human interactions with the archive, the 'people' chapter begins with a charming early eighteenth-century poem by a Saxon councilman that praises the archivist Johann Sebastian Müller by depicting him 'as alter ego of the personal archive' (84). Friedrich eagerly springs on this moment to posit a thought about the way archives and people shaped each other, '*symbiotic[ally]*'; a thought which becomes the main focus of the chapter.

The examination, within the latter half of Friedrich's book, of several case studies of archives which ostensibly served various administrative and political functions, results in the most interesting friction between practice and theory. The description of the Wettin archive in Weimar is a representative case in point:

in Saxony, ... the Ernestine line of the House of Wettin, founded in 1485, was repeatedly divided into half a dozen minor duchies. From 1554 on, the joint archive of all these lines was located in Weimar; in certain phases, its door had as many locks and keys as there were duchies. In order to use the archive, all the keys had to be brought together, which made tedious preparations necessary every time someone wanted to open it. (157)

The ability of the archive to represent power is thwarted by practicalities, and petty human concerns. Arndt Brendecke's chapter in *Archives & Information*, on knowledge and concealment in early modern Spain, complements this well, drawing out the 'essential paradox' (140) that archived documents are politically important (because kept) whilst also rendered redundant (because no longer actively consulted). He

masterfully explores the way that the archive might be manipulated whilst retaining a veneer of neutral transparency, commenting on 'the interesting assurance that the documents stored ... would behave like perfect courtiers: speaking only upon request and always saying the truth' (145). Similarly, Kate Peters takes up the question of access and power, arguing that the political interventions which made use of archives in the English civil war were as much about who had access to those spaces as the information held within them.

Also in the second part of *Archives & Information*, Arnold Hunt's essay on the early modern secretary cleverly draws out the knotty connections between secretary, secrets and statecraft. His discussion (111) of the substantial body of printed advice addressed to secretaries that blossomed in the sixteenth century is echoed in Friedrich's comment that 'the need to think and write about archives and archival practices systematically seems to be a new feature of the Early Modern Period' (13) (I should note here that this persistent capitalization of 'Early Modern' was my one, minor, stylistic grievance when reading). Friedrich doesn't explicitly ask how this new feature was a result of, or related to, the expansion of print, but it is surely connected: it is not only Hunt's essay that raises the way in which printing allowed writing *about* archives (and instructions for practice) to become prevalent. Although predominantly early modern in scope, Friedrich makes no claims to be working exclusively within a tightly defined chronological period. This, in fact, turns out to be one of the book's great strengths. Friedrich begins by reminding the reader that 'people collected and saved documents long before the rise of archival institutions' (35); he ends with a look forward and the consideration that 'if we look at the everyday practices of archival work, the caesura circa 1800 is not as sharp as it first may seem' (204). Within this broader scope, the work of *Archives & Information* argues nicely for the significance of the early modern; as with the definition of archive itself, it seems, the discussion works best when allowed freedom.

There is an awareness throughout both of these books of the ways that the topics, especially the focus throughout on the materiality of archives, affects not only their histories but also our current scholarship. Corens, Peters and Walsham state their intention to situate the new history of archives alongside 'the cognate fields of the history of the printed book and of scribal communication' (7). The part on materiality, with an essay by Heather Wolfe and Peter Stallybrass on files (strings upon which documents were stored) and their mostly overlooked traces in the archives today is sparkingly useful, as well as a delight to read. Sundar Henny similarly provides an insight into scribal and material culture that looks ahead at its own existence in the world. 'In our own time', he reflects, 'the materiality of libraries and archives with its demand of space and money seriously endangers the very survival of those institutions as we know them' (234). The work undertaken by these two books expends serious effort in doing the important work of drawing the conceptual history of the archive back into the practice and materiality of real archives, but it is the suggestions throughout of the way these discussions might look forward in time and relate to the reader which are the most thought-provoking. Sellers-García's excellent essay on the impact that physical distance had on the delayed responses of Mexican authorities to Guatemalan legal cases suggests the impact that location has. Friedrich, too, thinks about questions

of survival and destruction, and the shadow of wartime destruction is felt throughout his book. We are reminded that power and neutrality are not irrelevant to the world in which funding determines which archives will be studied and by whom; nor is it absent from the questions about digital archiving and what is (and isn't) available online. Re-evaluating the history of the archive, then, turns out to be a very good place to begin thinking about our own practices.

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