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Review of the book Archival Arrangement and Description: Analog to Digital, by L. Hamill

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Archival Arrangement and Description: Analog to Digital

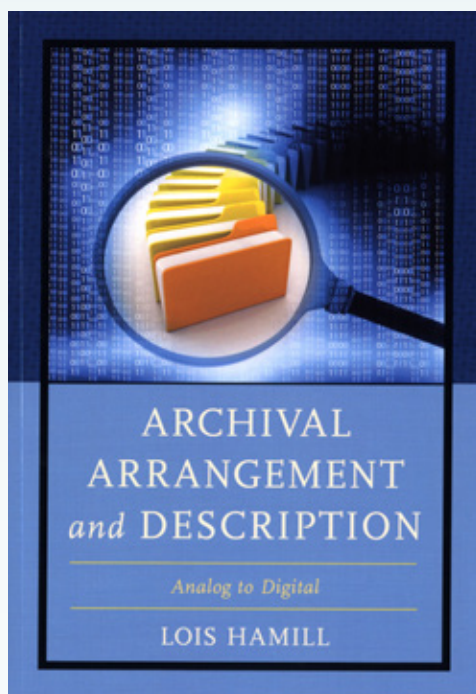
BY LOIS HAMILL. LANHAM, MD: ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD, 2017.

Reviewed by Kate Morris

Archival Arrangement and Description: Analog to Digital, by Lois Hamill offers a practical guide for processing both analog and digital archival materials that is grounded in archival theory and best practice. Hamill begins the book with a quote from former Society of American Archivists President Richard Pierce-Moses: “I believe that archivists need technical skills to be able to work with digital materials at a variety of levels.

At the same time, they need [a] strong grasp of archival principles to be able to translate and adapt those concepts into new ways of working.” Hamill builds off that statement throughout the book by beginning with a brief history of arrangement and description, a chapter on performing arrangement and description that focuses on analog materials, and then devotes the majority of the book to applying the principles of arrangement and description to digital materials. Overall, Hamill offers tools and guidance that practicing archivists can take and adapt to their own needs. Hamill provides actionable advice for digital arrangement and description that is particularly useful for archivists who are just starting to wrangle with their born digital, often hybrid collections.

Hamill’s initial history of arrangement and description is particularly insightful in explaining the evolution of and differences between the historical manuscript tradition and the public archives tradition. She emphasizes how current archival standards for description evolved from past standards and practices for bibliographic description. This introduction is bookended by Hamill’s last chapter, “Parting Thoughts,” in which she describes issues regarding the future of archival description, and relates those issues back to the genesis of archival description.



Hamill’s thoughtful consideration of the history and context of the current state of archival description provides an expert summary and analysis for those new to the field, and a concise review of the history of description that continues to affect archival description today. Hamill points out that archivists “still use the term cataloging instead of arrangement and description,” [10] and suggests that archivists need to consider or possibly re-consider how to capture the “significant information” for future generations to understand and interpret the “organizations, people, and activities that our archival records document.” [10]

Especially useful are the tables interspersed throughout different sections of the book. Hamill explains in the preface that she created the table while researching the book as a cheat sheet to capture the digital workflow, and that it is intended to be a guide that archivists can customize to fit the needs of their institutions rather than a prescriptive guide to what archivists must do. Each spreadsheet contains elements and guidance applicable to different components of the digital workflow. For example, the sample workflow for accessioning and creating a stable SIP (Submission Information Package) contains columns for archival tasks, location, and OAIS (Open Archival Information System) requirements. As an archivist at an institution that is just beginning to think about and implement processes for arranging, describing, and making available digital content, the tools described by Hamill in this book are useful and accessible. Each chapter also includes a section on program considerations, which provides a lens through which to examine your own programmatic needs based on institutional and administrative support.

In conclusion, this book is particularly useful for new archivists, graduate students in archival programs, and archivists who are embarking on implementing policies and procedures for arranging and describing their digital holdings. Additionally, archivists who seek practical tools and suggestions for creating DACS (Describing Archives: A Content Standard) compliant description will find templates for finding aids, glossary, and tables that list tools and software used throughout the book as especially useful. For the lone arrangers and others seeking practical guidance, this book combines a healthy mixture of archival theory and sound practical advice for implementing archival processing workflows for both analog and digital archival materials. This book may be read cover to cover,

or the reader may choose relevant chapters for specific guidance. For those new to the field, Hamill's background chapters build context around complicated concepts like OAIS functions.

Hamill emphasizes throughout the text that no single archivist can realistically possess expert knowledge of every function of analog to digital description, access, and preservation. Archivists should feel empowered to choose from among the tools and advice presented to create useful supports for arrangement and description that fit within available resources, and to work toward a balance between good enough and perfection.

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