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Review: Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling: Readings, Reflections, and Ruminations

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Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling: Readings, Reflections, and Ruminations by Richard J. Cox. Duluth, MN: Litwin Books, 2008. 418 pp. ISBN 978-0-9802004-7-8.

Within the archival community, the concept of personal archives has evolved from that of the private papers of well-known and/or powerful individuals (literary manuscripts, private diaries of administrators, etc.) to incorporate the daily recordkeeping and memory practices of potentially all individuals, regardless of their status. With the advent of digital technologies, the ability to create and share evidence of self, family, and community has grown in the public consciousness. Richard Cox's new book *Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling* is an appeal to archivists to tap into this increased awareness and to develop a "new partnership" with the public.

Throughout the book, Cox calls attention to what he calls "citizen archivists": those members of the general public who are interested in and attempting to preserve, collect, and/or organize personal and family records. Cox's central argument, articulated at the outset, is that personal archives are becoming more significant due to improved technologies and an increased desire for a personal connection to the past. Consequently, he urges archivists to adopt new roles as scribes-for-hire (p. 77), educators, or consultants, with a concomitant shift in emphasis from primarily serving the needs of academic researchers to equipping amateurs (citizen archivists) to archive themselves. For Cox, a chief effect of this newly envisioned role is what he perceives as the opportunity for archival advocacy and public consciousness-raising about the archival mission. As he points out throughout the text, more and more "citizen archivists" are becoming aware of, and in need of, recordkeeping and archiving skills. Archivists are best equipped to meet these needs, and can position themselves as experts in this area while simultaneously exposing the significance of archival services and repositories in society.

One of the strengths of this book is its close examination of emotion, sentimentality, and the personal subjective response to and desire for the record. The first part of the book explores these issues in terms of the impulse to preserve records as evidence of self, and family records as private windows to the past. In chapter 1 Cox points out that the average citizen has always played a role in the development of the public archive. Specifically, many collections only come to the archive after an individual or family has invested in collecting and preserving the documents. He states that "personal recordkeeping is linked to the human impulse for resisting oblivion," (p. 3) and he argues for a universal wish to leave evidence of the self. Although this chapter is framed within a context of a global desire for record-making and recordkeeping, he stops short of proclaiming that everyone will collect and use records in the same way. Chapters 2 and 3 are

interesting explorations of documentary forms and emotional responses and attachments to these forms. Throughout, he manages to juggle discussions of emerging digital forms and uses of digital technology with an examination of what he terms the romance of (paper) documents. Cox observes that personal records of the present and future are likely not to be “hidden away, but visibly posted on the Web” (p. 63). Here he reasserts the importance of the archivist’s advisory role in the future.

The second part of the book investigates the relationship between personal records and recordkeeping and identity. Cox cautions archivists to be cognizant of the importance and implications of this link for citizen archivists. The ethical and empathetic archivist will treat personal records very carefully, as these records are simultaneously transactional, evidentiary, and symbolic. Cox also draws attention to the material culture of recordkeeping and exposes the embeddedness of recordkeeping in both social structures and the built world.

The final portion of the book addresses the concept of the record in the context of digital objects, including email and Web documents such as blogs. Chapter 7 provides an overview of the shift from paper correspondence to email as communication and documentation within society. Cox pays special attention to how this shift affects the concerns of records managers and archivists differently and how it alters both organizational and personal archives. Cox’s most strident argument in this section is the reiteration of his earlier point about the need for archivists to adapt to a new partnership/scribe-for-hire role with the general populace. He writes that “unless archivists seek to educate these individuals about the nature of digital records such as email, much of it will be lost before we even have a chance to evaluate it” (p. 234). Chapter 8 considers the question of whether the Web can be considered an archive. As Cox points out, many individuals use the Web to save and share their personal records. To illustrate the significance of Web content for personal recordkeeping, Cox discusses blogs at some length. He compares the blog to the coveted personal diary of the analog archival world. Consequently, he sees the appraisal, preservation, and management of Web materials as a significant and immediate need in archival education.

Although this book is primarily a compilation of previously published articles, Cox has reworked and expanded them to form a coherent and sustained argument throughout the text. The book itself is sensibly designed and contains an extensive bibliography, index, and both conversational and bibliographic endnotes. Unfortunately, the chapters’ previous incarnations as journal articles are only indicated in the text of his introduction and do not appear either in the bibliography or in the endnotes of the chapters themselves.

This text has a number of strengths, as it is an excellent resource for thinking about the human and personal aspects of records and what the role of the

archivist is in relation to the subjective and the personal. However, there are a few limitations. Cox writes with a specific audience in mind—he states that his audience is professionally-educated archivists (p. 2)—but he also writes with a framework of shared familial contexts between himself and his audience. For example, he relates an anecdote in which a researcher became interested in his family history after helping his grandfather sort through an old box of memorabilia and family papers. He writes that “most of us can identify with this experience,” (p. 27) demonstrating an assumption of intergenerationality, boxes of keepsakes, and extant family relationships. The familial assumptions (those pertaining to family recordkeeping practices, the desire to remember, and the forms and fixity of records and memory objects) are not detrimental to the overall arguments he makes (as his generalizations are probably accurate for a large portion of his intended audience), but they do call into question the ultimate universality of his claims regarding personal and familial memory and recordkeeping. Since this book hinges on the notion of the citizen archivist preserving his or her own records, Cox’s generalizations about personal and family life could potentially be problematic.

The inclusion of personal records in public archives holds great promise for balancing the voices and representations of social groups within the archive. If archival collections can be partially divorced from institutional contexts, those communities that are not currently or historically well served by institutions can have a greater presence in the archive if their personal and family papers are included. While Cox does address the notions of social power, inclusion, and community archives at several points in the text, this topic could have become a stronger focus of the book. Although he addresses community archives and presence, the book does not serve as a major guide or resource for this topic, as it focuses on the general, the family, and the individual instead.

Overall, this is a useful and timely addition to the corpus of archival literature. Cox is insightful and has marked a potential shift in the functions of both public archives and private records. Several of the chapters provide succinct and thoughtful introductions to topics that would be well suited to introductory archival education courses. Cox has written extensively on the nature of records, archival advocacy, and the archives profession. As a member of the Pittsburgh Project, an archival educator, and a former practitioner, he has explored the nature of the record in detail and is well equipped to contemplate the interplay of documentary forms, the personal and the public, and the subjective and the academic, as well as the role of the archivist in these interchanges. More information about the book can be found on the publisher’s website at <http://litwinbooks.com>.

Reviewer

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