letters from librarians

History and Memory: The Problem of the Archive

FRANCIS X. BLOUIN, JR.

IT IS OFTEN SAID THAT A CENTURY AGO THE AUTHOR AND THE READER OCCUPIED THE SAME SPACE. I AM TOLD THAT MUCH OF modern literature is the result of a separation in that sense of space. It could also easily be said that a century ago archives and history occupied the same conceptual and methodological space. This sense of partnership in the study of the past has undergone a variety of stresses and strains over recent decades, to the point that what constitutes the archive has become a question fundamental to how our knowledge of the past is acquired and shaped. History and archives now occupy very different spaces, a condition that has conceptual, technical, and practical causes. Among the many consequences of this intellectual divide is the need for a new understanding of the archive apart from its historical roots.

The space shared by archives and history a century ago was defined collectively by those who studied the archive as a window to the past and by those entitled to influence the archive in its formation and content. This unified conceptual space represented a shared interest in the importance of institutions, a shared sense of prominent actors, a shared view of seminal events, and a shared sense of national boundaries and definitions. Once assembled and developed, the content of the archive in many ways defined the boundaries of a historical scholarship that focused on state formation and national self-perception.

If the historian was not witness, what gave authority to historical perception in this process of definition and understanding? Since ancient times, the archive had been the location of the record. Refined in the early modern period with the establishment of diplomatics, archives were increasingly regarded as the location of "authentic" records. The idea of authority embedded in the notion of an authentic record privileged the archives as an authoritative source in understanding the past. Archives were a critical element in Rankean positivism and Collingwood's idea of history. Authority in coming to an understanding of the past rested on an acceptance of the archive and on a faith in the authenticity of its holdings. On occasion, that faith could be shaken by a false document, but the fundamental link between the purpose of the archive and the purpose of history stood firm.

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This conceptual and methodological partnership has undergone stresses and strains on both sides. History and those disciplines that increasingly embrace a historical perspective have broadened the range of what questions legitimately constitute a systematic examination of the past. The reach of these questions and the search for validation in forming a response has pushed historians to new constructs of what constitutes a legitimate historical source. The archive, too, has evolved. The archivist is no longer the twin of the historian. Other participants formerly marginalized have emerged in the formation of archival holdings. Moreover, technical considerations coupled with the exponentially increasing amount of records produced have forced new approaches to the administration of those records in the archive. The result is a divide between two activities once consonant.

Readers of this journal will understand readily the breadth of questions now considered historical. History proper as a discipline has over recent decades embraced a growing variety of questions increasingly informed by theoretical perspectives on social behavior, interaction, and power. Moreover, as Terrence McDonald has shown in his volume *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences*, other disciplines, including literature, are turning more often to historical methodology to understand the place of texts and experience in time. The work of Lynn Hunt and others in cultural theory and in the role of cultures in informing identity, place, and experience has pushed the boundaries of historical understanding to include the relevance of memory as recollection, opening the possibility of multiple pasts. What of the role of memory in shaping the need for historical understanding? What is the role of identity formation in structuring the boundaries of inquiry? In the context of these kinds of historical questions, the archive becomes more problematic in its capacity to inform inquiries and authenticate discourse. If society and its internal interactions were indeed culturally based, then was not the archive, too, a product of the same cultural dynamic? What is in the archive? How did it get there? By what political or cultural construct were the records assembled and presented? What, then, is the authority of the records in validating a historical understanding? What is not there? What is the authority of the absence in affirming broad cultural realities? The archive thus moves from being a place of study to becoming the object of study.

As the range of historical questions was expanding, the production of archival records in post-Vietnam-era bureaucratic society mushroomed, ushering in what F. Gerald Ham called the "post-custodial era." As never before, archivists were faced with a need to select. The National Archives of the United States, for example, now retains less than two percent of the records produced by government. How are such choices to be made? At an earlier time when history and the archive together were concerned with institutions and principal actors, the work of one informed the other. In recent decades, at the very time selection became an essential practical matter for the archive, the range of historical questions widened. Every record was of potential historical value. Even though bureaucratic institutions were generating mountains of records, there was increasing concern about the adequacy of those records as a source for documenting a diverse society and culture. How was the archival record to be formed? The fleeting nature of particular historiographical perspectives, coupled with difficulties in anticipating future historiographical trends, marginalized academic historical analysis as authoritative in the evaluative constructs at the root of processes that formed the archive. Rather, in archival methodology, there was a technical turn that increasingly defines the archive today. The archive now is more inclined to emphasize the essential relations embedded in records—that is, the link between the record and the activity that created it. As Helen Samuels notes in her archival analysis of the functional processes of higher education, "Little can be done [by the archivist] to anticipate future research trends that alter the questions asked or the use of the documentation. . . . Rather than relying

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on subjective guesses about potential research, appraisal decisions must be guided by clearer documentary objectives based on a thorough understanding of the phenomenon or institution to be documented" (8). The emphasis on the intrinsic functionality of institutions or activities rests on sophisticated analyses of the nature of record keeping that are rooted in historical notions of the archive as record combined with ideas of modern bureaucratic systems and with constructs of organizational behavior and structure. These essentialist constructs that form the archive avoid the problem of historiographical relativity.

The archive, then, is formed of records that may be but are not necessarily received as historical sources. The archive in this essentialist construct is presented as independent of any historiographical construct. Yet it could be argued that the archive still operates within certain cultural and political norms, of which the archivist may or may not be aware. These norms may be implicit in the formation of the archive, most notably in the formation of a national archive. The mediating function of culture and politics embedded in these norms, often in the name of tradition, is not always apparent in the representation of the content of the archive.

Hence, while removed from explicit historiographical frameworks, the archive in its selection, organization, and presentation may implicitly reinforce certain cultural and political constructs, which, in shaping the content of the record, also shape how we come to know the past. So Carolyn Steedman can ask, what is in the archive? And Nicholas Dirks can query what it means that the history of postcolonial societies is often reliant on archives constructed in a colonial frame of mind. These questions go beyond the traditional issues of the veracity of documentation—reading the documents with a critical eye—that have been at the root of archive-based historiography. Rather, they query the archive itself, its formation, its purpose, and its links to sponsoring institutions. The archive, then, itself is an intellectual problem and a cultural artifact worthy of study.

For the study of issues from a historical perspective, the archival divide is real. The essentialist methodologies of the archive coupled with new linguistic requirements for the delivery of information in powerful but highly structured technological systems create critical questions that need to be addressed as the archive is encountered. To visit the archive is to engage a well-developed set of intellectual, cultural, political, and technical constructs often removed from the constructs and language of academic discourse.

Embedded in this tension are a host of issues regarding the importance of documentation for an understanding of the past, the problem of absences in archives, the nature of access systems, the relative position of academic users among the constituents of the archive, and, most important, the extent to which the archive constitutes an authoritative route or routes by which we come to know the past. Faced with the force of memory, the problems inherent in constructs of culture, and the diversity in forming questions of the past, is the archive still a privileged authenticator of the past?

Note

This letter is derived from a larger work under way in collaboration with my colleague William Rosenberg in the Department of History at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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