

Book Reviews



Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society. Ed. Richard J. Cox and David A. Wallace. Westport, Conn.: Quorum, 2002. 340p. alk. paper, \$68.95 (ISBN 1567204694). LC 2001-57863.

The earliest years of the twenty-first century are interesting times for archivists and records managers. The transition in recent decades from traditional methods and media to electronic records is one source of challenge and opportunity. The increasing democratization of countries around the world brings us closer to the three goals of transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in government, exerting new pressures on existing structures often unaccustomed to openness. In the wake of the terrorist attacks in late 2001, we also are negotiating the difficult path between Scylla and Charybdis as we seek to balance freedom and security—two goals that sometimes lead to awkward and tenuous compromises. Add to this mix the recent disclosures of corporate corruption, such as those revealed in investigations of the Enron collapse and the shredding of documents by employees of Arthur Andersen, and we can begin to comprehend the complicated environment in which archivists work today.

Even so, the social role of record keepers is replete with problems and never simple. Cox and Wallace (Universities of Pittsburgh and Michigan) have brought together fourteen original case studies that examine the ethical conflicts and practical problems that occur in the varied environments in which we work. The invited papers, well researched and written, are by archivists from North America, Australia, Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean. A listing of the subjects covered gives an overview of the wide variety of areas dealt with: the Iran-Contra affair, “Big Tobacco,” stolen Holo-

caust-era assets, Nazi war criminal immigrants, commercial bank failures in Jamaica, allegations of child abuse in state-operated institutions, Official Secrets Acts and Executive Orders, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, Apartheid, the papers of Martin Luther King Jr., personnel records in academic institutions, and the forgery of Mormon “historical” documents. In aggregate, they present a mosaic of conflict for record keepers, often as engagingly told as Altick’s classic, *The Scholar Adventurers*, is for the literary historian.

These original papers are presented in four sections. The first deals with the problems of explanation (how archivists explain to others, often in the courtroom, the nature and value of the historical record). The second section illustrates the problems of secrecy and the inevitable result of government and corporate cover-ups as they seek protection from responsibility for their misdeeds. Memory treats the preservation and thus the possibility of interpretation of the historical record. The final section deals with trust and violations of honesty and the occasional, or pervasive, bungling of basic record-keeping protocols.

The introductory essay is an excellent overview of the subject, giving context to the overlapping themes developed in the case studies. The book has a very detailed index, and the copious set of citations will lead readers to sources used, but also to other areas of study for students preparing for careers in archives and records management. The wider audience includes all of us who are dependent upon records and, to a very substantial degree, that includes all of us in modern society, wherever we may find ourselves.—*Charles Wm. Conaway, Florida State University.*