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Review of Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions — Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels

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Review of *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions — Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels*

By Terry Cook, ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011.
460 pp. Soft cover. \$56.00. ISBN 1-931666-36-9

My colleagues and students have never accused me of being a romantic sentimentalist. I recently changed professional positions and have begun reflecting on my years in the archival profession. My students have often asked how my archival career was shaped and influenced. There are particularly interested in who had the most impact on me. Off-hand, I can think of a number of professors and archivists that offered mentorship and assistance through many years of my service. However, there is one in particular, Helen Willa Samuels who had a rather profound influence on my professional interests. Despite the fact, that I never met or corresponded with her, I was energized and inspired by her articles, publications, and presentations. She not only helped revolutionize the archival profession, but encouraged us as professionals to review and revise how we thought about documenting the modern global society. The concept of documentation strategies was particularly influential.

Samuels was the long-time institutional archivist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and continually encouraged the archival profession to reconsider previous dogma. She encouraged archivists to revise and rethink how then went about appraising records to add to archival collections so that we would be better positioned to meet future demands. Richard Cox underscores Samuels's role in encouraging archivists to think outside the box when he states that "Helen Samuels's early writings and some of her subsequent work was derived from working in circumstances where technology played a critical role. She was involved with the joint Committee on the Archives of Science and Technology (JCAST), a group issuing what is still one of the best research and planning documents in the profession's history, even though, it is more than two decades old." (p. 134) Samuels retired from MIT in 2004; however, her commitment will be sustained and legacy assured.

This book of tribute contains a series of essays honoring Samuels's commitment to the profession. It contains a total of nineteen essays which are divided into two separate sections: 1) "Documenting Society" and 2) "Representing Archives/ Being Archival." The book also includes Samuels own personal perspectives and statements regarding her own professional career.

Samuels quotes from George Orwell to highlight the importance of maintaining the evidence contained in records and the frightening results that could occur if records are destroyed irresponsibly: "*Who controls the past, who controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past... Past events...survive only in written*

records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control of all records, and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it."

Samuels redefined the idea of institutional documentary strategies beginning in the early 1980's. Richard Cox states in *"That the old world of archival appraisal underwent a seismic shift in the 1980's with a growing concern about the effectiveness of appraisal approaches and an assessment of their end results, a shift in which Helen Samuels was a key player."* (p. 131)

Probably one of the most striking essays (besides the perspectives of Samuels herself) in *Documenting the Past* is that of South African archivist Verne Harris. In his essay "Ethics and the Archive: An Incessant movement of Recontextualization" he describes the wholesale destruction of records after the fall of apartheid in South Africa. According to Harris, the South African government tried to "control the past" by destroying evidential documents relating to the policies carried out during apartheid. As a result, Harris decided to leave government service.

Finally, Rand Jimerson's essay "How Archivists Control the Past" stresses the importance of documentary evidence, the significant role it plays in modern society, and the results of prefabrication and manipulation. As again quoted by Jimerson *"If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, it never happened — that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture or death,' Orwell warned. '...And if all other accepted the lie which the Party imposed — if all records told the same tale — then the lie passed into history and became truth."* (p. 369)

Controlling the Past reminds us of the critical role we play as archivists. We have a responsibility to work to ensure that records, such as those described by Verne Harris remain intact and accessible. We also have a collective responsibility to ensure that we remain committed, dutiful, and vigilant in protecting and securing records as well as ensuring their legacies and well-being. Thanks to Helen Willa Samuels and the contributions of many other archivists, we will continue to formulate strategies to allow this to happen.

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