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Review of Waldo Gifford Leland and the Origins of the American Archival Profession

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Review of *Waldo Gifford Leland and the Origins of the American Archival Profession*

By Peter J. Wosh, ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011.
398 pp. Soft cover. \$62.95. ISBN 1-931666-40-7

My familiarity with Waldo Leland stems from his 1904 reference book, *Guide to the Archives of the Government of the United States in Washington*. I know this source, however, from my work as a history bibliographer and academic reference librarian, not as an archivist. My archival ignorance in this connection is assuredly not unique. Indeed, I suspect that most archivists would have difficulty identifying Leland or explaining his contribution to the archival profession.

The book under review redresses this unfortunate situation. In his elegantly designed text, Peter J. Wosh affords readers both an overview of Leland's life and work and access to his significant writings and reminiscences. Leland was not a professional archivist, but rather an administrator with the Carnegie Corporation (1903-1926) and the American Council of Learned Societies (1926-1946). In these positions, he undertook several ambitious historical documentary projects during the course of which he developed a profound interest in government documents and a deep-seated concern over their haphazard preservation. He determined that federal and state governments must establish centralized agencies for their records' safekeeping and that a new type of professional was needed to administer them. As Wosh's edited volume demonstrates, Leland's contribution to the field was as an archives and archival profession advocate, not an archival practitioner.

Interspersing historical narrative with original documents, Wosh fashions an intriguing portrayal of Leland's work and thought. The book begins with an overview of Leland's family and childhood, with emphasis upon his early 1900s Brown and Harvard college days, where he was mentored respectively by historians John Franklin Jamison and Albert Bushnell Hart. These two academics, explains Wosh, were key figures in the professionalization of the historical discipline and promoters of a new "scientific" approach to scholarship based on rigorous primary documentation. Their ideas were shaped by the wider Progressive movement then taking place in governmental and academic circles, as scholars "sought to both professionalize their disciplines and use them as vehicles to promote public engagement and civic reform" (p. 14). Leland, according to Wosh, "cast his lot with these scientific and progressive professionalizers who hoped to shape a new community of historical practice" (p.18). Key to this professionalization was the availability of reliable and authentic records.

Although interested in historical research, Leland followed a different path from his eminent history professors. In 1903, while still a Harvard doctoral student, he accepted a “temporary” position with the Carnegie Corporation to survey early American government documents in Washington, D.C. His Carnegie employment continued for twenty years, during which time Leland worked on a series of documentary projects in the US and Europe. As he ferreted out record collections in private attics and abandoned offices, Leland witnessed firsthand American recordkeeping’s shameful state. This experience converted Leland into an archival missionary, and he spent the next four decades advocating for an American public archives tradition comparable to what he had observed in Europe.

Following this biographical narrative, Wosh presents a series of documents drawn from Leland’s published writings and personal papers. Although arranged in chronological order (beginning with a 1908 paper on photography’s potential to reproduce documents and ending with a 1955 interview conducted by Dean Albertson as part of the Columbia University Oral History Project), the documents are thematic in nature, demonstrating Leland’s multifaceted archival interests and concerns. These documents also have relevance to current professional issues and debates, such as the authenticity of reformatted records, the utility of provenance and original order in archival theory and practice, the design and use of archival facilities, and disaster planning. Adding to these documents’ research value are Wosh’s thoughtful introductions explaining each item’s historical context and its contribution to the pre-World War II development of archival thinking. The book concludes with an epilogue, cleverly titled “Where’s Waldo,” in which Wosh places Leland into a more current context, assessing his ideas against contemporary debates over cultural memory and its archival keepers.

Through this deft interweaving of historical analysis and documentation, Wosh introduces readers not merely to Waldo Leland but also to the community of archivists who pioneered the Progressive Era’s archival profession. *Waldo Gifford Leland and the Origins of the American Archival Profession* is not an uncritical portrayal of Leland and his associates, however, for Wosh readily concedes their elitism and their narrow archival vision. “Professionalization,” observes Wosh, “meant marginalizing the periphery, minimizing dissenting voices, and establishing a new orthodoxy.... Community boundaries had been established. Diversity [in the archives and in the profession] largely disappeared” (p. 45). Such criticism notwithstanding, this important new book reestablishes Leland’s stature in the founding of America’s archival profession and clearly demonstrates his influence on subsequent generations.

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