

2018

Review of A History of Archival Practice

Randall C. Jimerson

Western Washington University, randall.jimerson@wwu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jimerson, Randall C. (2018) "Review of A History of Archival Practice," *Journal of Western Archives*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26077/fe4d-988f>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol9/iss1/4>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Western Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



Review of *A History of Archival Practice*

By Paul Delsalle, translated and revised by Margaret Procter. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. 245 pp. Hardcover. ISBN: 978-1-4094-5524-0

For archivists engaged in the daily demands of practical responsibilities, it is important to step back occasionally and consider the origins, development, and purposes of archival activity and practice. Exploring the history of the archival profession brings us back to fundamental questions of purpose, values, and principles. It also grounds us within a lengthy professional heritage and enables us to recognize the common goals and methods we share with colleagues from earlier generations and distant lands.

A History of Archival Practice by Paul Delsalle provides a valuable perspective on these matters. It surveys the practice of documenting human experience from the earliest cave paintings to the eve of the electronic age of the 21st century. Despite some limitations, this slim volume makes valuable contributions to our understanding of archival practice in a global context, dating back more than two millennia.

First published in French in 1998 as *Une histoire de l'archivistique*, Delsalle's work is only now available in English. Delsalle is Professor of History at the Université de Franche-Comté, France, focusing on editing 16th and 17th century documents. Margaret Procter, Senior Lecturer in Record and Archive Studies at the University of Liverpool, United Kingdom, translated and revised this first English language edition. She actually deserves credit as a co-author, since she added recent scholarship to update developments in both practice and theory in the past two decades, and provided "additional examples from the English-speaking world" as well as English language bibliographical sources (p. i).

Delsalle begins his ambitious project by stating that "a definitive universal history of archival practice from its origins to the present day" would be impossible. (ix) His more modest aim is "to provide archivists, and especially archive students, with no more and no less than a preliminary outline and provisional synthesis of the subject." (xii) The book follows a broadly chronological sequence, beginning with separate chapters on the ancient world and the classical world of Greece and Rome. It then shifts focus away from the traditional Western emphasis on Mesopotamia and Europe, to devote two chapters to archives and archival practices in Asia and Africa and in the Americas, both from antiquity to the 18th century. The focus of most of the

remaining chapters returns to Europe. Chapters 5-10 cover the Middle Ages and early modern era, and chapters 11-15 focus on the 19th and 20th centuries. The final chapter (16) provides a conclusion examining the value of this historical perspective.

The encyclopedic scope of the volume prevents detailed examination of most topics covered. However, Delsalle provides some valuable glimpses into the nature of recordkeeping practices, brief quotations from practitioners and observers over the centuries, and a few choice vignettes providing telling details. For example, he offers a useful commentary on the spread of paper-making from China to the Arab world and thereby to Europe. He also explains the connection between “oral archives” in sub-Saharan Africa to written documentation in other cultures, with a nod to the *quipus* (knotted cords used by the Incas for remembrance of events) and even a 15th-century illustration of an indigenous cord-keeper. (60-62)

In the early modern era, according to Delsalle, the Portuguese and Spanish established “the defining era” in which modern archival practice developed. This included developing regulations for archival practice and creating finding aids based on functions of the creating governmental offices. (108-111) Although *respect des fonds* became an established archival principle only in 1840s France, he argues, the concept of organizing documents according to their office of origin dates back much earlier—perhaps to antiquity. (231) As early as 1687, records keepers argued the necessity of destroying documents no longer needed for administration. (143) These observations challenge the common assumption that records were retained in this era without concern for appraisal and disposition.

Delsalle makes clear the connection between political power and recordkeeping. Recognizing the close connection between development of an archival profession and the nationalist movements of the 19th century, he quotes Napoleon: “The state needs a good archivist more than it needs a good artillery general.” (126)

Both because there is more literature on archival practices in the 19th and 20th centuries, and because the professional developments of this period more clearly shaped contemporary practice, he devotes more than a third of the volume to this modern era. He offers more details here than in earlier chapters (and time periods), covering archival legislation, professional standards, buildings, researchers, destruction of records in war, the development of the archival profession and of international associations (notably the Brussels Congress of 1910 and, since 1948, the International Council on Archives).

There are some weaknesses in this ambitious book, which at times tries to do too much in too little space. As with many History textbook authors, Delsalle falls victim to “mentionitis,” the desire to list as many as possible of the known facts, developments, and events in his long narrative arc. Particularly in the early chapters, each of which covers numerous centuries, the book reads like a long list of details, sprinkled with brief quotations and anecdotes. The reader may be left wishing for a broader context and explanation, or for a comparative analysis framed as a thematic story of how recordkeeping and archival practices evolved over centuries of

experimentation and development. Delsalle offers brief overviews of the numerous topics and time periods covered in each chapter. But many readers will wish that he developed these analyses more fully.

One example of this effort to mention as many countries as possible comes in his chapter on Asia and Africa. After brief commentaries on archival practices in China, Tibet, Japan, and Korea, Delsalle summarizes centuries of archival practice in Thailand in a single sentence. (38) He then moves on to India before a similar tour of African countries.

Despite Delsalle's efforts to be comprehensive, there are inevitable gaps in coverage of many parts of the globe and many eras of human recordkeeping. He explains that reliable evidence simply does not exist for many of these missing pieces of his narrative. In some instances, the history of recordkeeping and archives simply was disjointed. Many of the gaps in our knowledge of these events occur because people in different parts of the world (or even in the same regions) could not pass on their knowledge of important aspects of archival practice. In some cases, people did not learn from the past or retain a heritage of archival concepts.

This is not a "perfect" book, but it is a valuable addition to our knowledge of archival history. Delsalle admits that it is only "a preliminary outline and provisional synthesis." However, as such, it offers the reader a first step toward a global, inclusive understanding of how archival practices have evolved, from cave paintings and cuneiform tablets to digital technologies. In particular, it opens windows into archival practices in many parts of the world not often included in Western writings about the historical development of archival practices. For this broader perspective readers in many disciplines, but particularly in archives and history, should offer grateful thanks to Paul Delsalle.

We should also acknowledge the important efforts of Margaret Procter, who translated, revised, and updated this 1998 volume. She faced some challenges in translating Delsalle's writings, since there are no exact English equivalents for some French terms. This includes the title, since the term "*l'archivistique*" usually is translated as "archival science," but for this book the term "archival practice" is more accurate. Procter added additional examples, evidence, and references from her own English context. This even included adding seven of her own photographs to illustrate English examples of archival documents, buildings, and storage media. She also added citations to relevant literature published after the original French edition of the book, and provided several 21st century updates for themes Delsalle had introduced. In a brief Afterword, Procter also points out that some prominent concerns of archivists in recent years had only begun to be addressed at the time Delsalle wrote. These included, among other developments, the rapid increase in significance for electronic recordkeeping and digital archives, as well as the use of archives to promote and protect human rights. (233)

For anyone interested in the historical development of archival practice or in the variety of perspectives available through the lens of international or global comparisons, *A History of Archival Practice* is a welcome addition to the growing literature on archival history.

Rand Jimerson
Professor of History and Director,
Archives and Records Management
Graduate Program
Western Washington University
Bellingham, Washington