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Book Review: Archival Arrangement and Description

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Review of *Archival Arrangement and Description*

Edited with an Introduction by Christopher J. Prom and Thomas J. Frusciano; featuring modules by Sibyl Schaefer, Janet M. Bunde, J. Gordon Daines, and Daniel A. Santamaria. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2012.

230 pp. Soft cover. \$34.99. ISBN 1-931666-45-8

Many of us started our work as archivists during the awkward transition phase between analog and digital. This is the phase that hatched enduring, albeit often humorous, stories that start with an archivist trying (unsuccessfully) to put a 3” floppy disk into a machine that doesn’t have a slot for it. Next, the archivist tracks down a machine with a disk drive, struggles to find a program to read the mystery files, and ultimately finds membership lists that have nothing to do with the collection. In the midst of wondering why we bothered was a very real worry that we could have missed (or deleted, or lost) something crucial.

Even more of us were guided by manuals from the Society of American Archivists (SAA), launching into our careers or preparing for that launch in graduate school with descriptive practices informed by the wisdom in foundational books by David B. Gracy II (*Archives and Manuscripts: Arrangement and Description in 1977*), Fredric M. Miller (*Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts in 1990*), and Kathleen D. Roe (*Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts in 2005*). As we settle into an era of electronic records and manuscripts, we need a new set of foundational texts.

The 2013 book *Archival Arrangement and Description*, the first installment in SAA’s “Trends in Archival Practice,” is an apt companion to Roe’s book and is sure to become a standard on physical or digital bookshelves for those in the traditional “A & D” audience. However, it has broader appeal for students, those who work in public or instruction services, and those in our “allied” professions (museums, libraries, historical societies). This book of descriptive standards, practical steps, software, and tools feels a bit like a guidebook for a somewhat unfamiliar land. The editors and authors offer straight-forward and well-researched information about how archivists can learn about and prepare for managing both digitized and born-digital materials. Even though my main work is no longer in arrangement or descriptive work, as I read this book I immediately began a long list for putting these ideas into practice in my work with undergraduate students, interns, and community groups.

Editors Christopher J. Prom and Thomas J. Frusciano offer a great introduction for the three modules that constitute the book, situating it in its context on page one with the simple statement that “[a]ll archivists confront change–change in the types

and formats of documents we process, change in the context under which those documents were created, change in the topics and subject matter they document” (Frusciano and Prom 2013, 1). While our professional principles and theories inform our efforts and ground our practice, this change asks for (demands) our own professional evolution – and this is where these modules come in. Prom and Frusciano stress that it is necessary to “understand and use a range of descriptive standards to facilitate intellectual control and to improve access”; develop techniques to process “born-digital” or electronic records; and use methods that “make descriptive information about archives, and archival materials themselves, accessible via the Internet” (Frusciano and Prom 2013, 2-3). In other words, while we don’t all have to agree on the same standard, produce the same finding aid, or give up our unique identities, we do have to know about and agree on the same ground rules if we are going to preserve and provide access to the historical materials in our collections.

Sibyl Schaefer and Janet M. Bunde begin the book with an exploration of how standards facilitate intellectual control and improve access, J. Gordon Daines III examines practices and procedures for processing and providing access to digital records and manuscripts in the second section, and Daniel A. Santamaria discusses methods for making descriptive information and archival materials available online in the final section. I liked that each of the four contributing authors focused on the elements of description and the history or theories behind those elements. In other words, rather than focusing exclusively on the creation of finding aids, they provide more general guidance on how to carry out the tasks of arranging and describing electronic materials, as well as background information on the practices that informed the tasks.

The first module, “Standards for Archival Description,” is extremely well-researched and the justification for the use of standards is straight forward. Schaefer and Bunde discuss the general importance of standards and how they are applied to archival work, national and international descriptive and metadata standards, the future of archival standards and collaborative projects, and guidelines for individual repositories to best assess their own needs. They stress that standards only work if people use them, which has obvious implications for the effectiveness of retrieval (by people and machines) and the building of future systems. They also emphasize importance for repositories to assess their own needs and abilities, namely considering the staff time, knowledge, and support needed for full EAD implementation. While reading an in-depth description of so many different standards can be overwhelming, I appreciated the level of detail and explanation shown, including the authors’ practice of providing references to external resources only after a brief description or discussion. I also found great value in the robust selection of “questions to consider” when looking at the standards for description, such as resources, needs, users, materials, grants, information technology support, and the use of volunteers. Overall, in addition to its value as a reference tool for consultation when reading other texts, this section is valuable in its robust

description of individual standards, as well as its discussion of the evolution and interrelatedness of standards.

In the second module, “Processing Digital Records and Manuscripts,” Daines calls on archivists to adapt our traditional descriptive practices to meet the new reality of born-digital materials, asking us to adopt new skills, practices, and terminology, as well as adjust, reengineer, and reimagine our workflows. The key word for this section is “practical” and like Module 1, this module is meant to be used. It is clear that Daines wants readers to walk away with new ideas and plans for processing and providing access to digital materials; however, he roots his discussion in the familiar by referencing Roe’s work and using recognizable terms, models, practices, workflows, and procedures. In addition to referencing case studies that approach e-records description differently, Daines provides a good description of software and tools, setting them into the workflow and providing both a review of projects and tables comparing the features of particular tools. He also provides sample processing, accessioning, and arrangement and description workflows that may seem familiar to the audience, but offer “significant adjustments regarding the steps taken to accomplish those tasks” (Daines 2013, 109). Overall, the section is framed in terms of a “business process mapping” model, described as a “series of interrelated activities, crossing functional boundaries, with specific inputs and outputs’...necessary to complete archival processing” (Daines 2013, 100). In a business process model, archival processing is broken down into seven tasks, which can then be broken down into subtasks; it is through examination of these tasks and subtasks that an archivist can adjust their traditional processing workflows when working with digital records and manuscripts. Carrying this “task”/“subtask” breakdown throughout the section makes an overwhelming or complicated topic more mentally manageable. Finally, I appreciated that Daines didn’t acquiesce to the “format isn’t important, the content is the same” refrain when discussing archival work with digital records; he offers a helpful discussion on the differences and similarities between physical, digital, and hybrid collections, concluding that even if the tasks of accessioning, processing, arranging, or describing aren’t different based on format, the importance, order, or items gathered might be. He encourages archivists to be mindful of personal archiving practices, storage concerns, and our role in teaching creators about how their actions impact our archival work and the historical record. His final list of recommendations should prove useful for a variety of archivists, from the processing archivist working through a collection to an instruction archivist in a classroom environment explaining archival arrangement to students.

While access is implicit in the content of the first two modules, Santamaria’s section “Designing Descriptive and Access Systems” calls out the struggle many repositories face in trying to open up their holdings in the face of a plethora of access tools and strategies, as well as limited staffing and budgetary resources. In addition to basic definitions of finding aids and EAD, he offers descriptions of archival collection management systems, with attention paid to how different types of repositories and individual professional experience might impact the system chosen. He stresses adopting a realistic approach when evaluating these access tools and systems,

recognizing that they require installation, set-up and routine maintenance, a basic set of technical skills, and an ongoing infrastructure for support. Like Daines, he provides useful figures and screenshots throughout the module, offers a range of descriptive and access systems based on staffing and money, and recommends simple to advanced implementation strategies. Overall, Santamaria builds on the lessons in Schaefer and Bunde's module and emphasizes the importance of consistency and adherence to standards. While saying that the goal of every repository's archivist should be to represent collections online, Santamaria encourages realism and practicality when setting standards for questions like what a "minimum level" record is for new accessions. However, while this module didn't feel prescriptive about record details or tools used, Santamaria does stress that "repositories should strive to create structured data and to map data elements to those prescribed by DACS, ISAD (G), or, in rare cases, another content standard" (Santamaria 2013, 156).

Published as both an e-book and a print edition, I appreciated that this book seemed to be built on flexibility and user needs. The editors acknowledge that the traditional mode of publishing means that works reflect the methods generally accepted at the point of publication; however, technologies, methods, and needs change faster than this traditional publication cycle can accommodate. While I agree, I find it ironic that in Susan Davis' review of Roe's 2005 book she is concerned with the same issue of timeliness and revision.¹

"Although [Fredric] Miller has served us well, the descriptive world has changed fairly dramatically since 1990, and a revision reflecting current descriptive standards was certainly needed. The Roe manual brings us up to date without sacrificing most of what we valued in its predecessor. The problem with writing on this topic, as Roe points out at the end of her introduction, is that change is rapid. Anything one writes is quickly out of date" (Davis 2006, 229).

History tends to repeat itself? Irony aside, it is with optimism that I write that archivists at many stages will benefit immensely from this more dynamic or "modular" approach to publishing and the products of the Trends series to meet their ever-changing and evolving needs. The goal of the series' modular approach is "to build agile, user-centered resources." The Trends in Archives Practice Series site says

[e]ach module will treat a discrete topic relating to the practical management of archives and manuscript collections in the digital age. Lots of modules are planned, and readers will be invited to mix, match, and combine modules that best satisfy their needs and interests.²

1. Susan E. Davis, Book Review "Kathleen D. Roe, Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts," *American Archivist* 69, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2006): 228-231.
2. Society of American Archivists, "Trends in Archival Practice," <http://www2.archivists.org/news/2013/trends-in-archives-practice-series> (accessed April 10, 2013).

With this book as a model, I have high hopes for other publications with a similar format of distinct individual chapters that can stand strong on their own as modules or to be read as a narrative whole.

That said, I see an advantage to reading these individual modules together as parts of that larger narrative whole. The authors did an excellent job of providing references to other chapters, reflecting the overlapping reality of arrangement and description practices. At the same time, though it was valuable to read the entire text once as an overview, I also see continuing value in using this book as a reference text when working on a specific collection or answering a particular question. The sections are structured in such a way that they open with a broader discussion about the topic, but delve into specifics, allowing the reader to narrow in on their particular interest or immediate need for information. Someone generally interested in standards or access systems, especially the historical significance or predictions for future advances, would benefit from the introductory portions of the sections; at the same time, those who are firmly rooted in descriptive practice would find value in the detailed description of systems or standards.

While I learned from the authors and their case studies, and all four provided excellent references for future study and a generous works cited list, it is clear that practice is essential. For future iterations or projects related to archival arrangement and description, I see value in an online learning module or tutorial to complement the information offered in this text. An online resource could show examples of systems, software, and tools; have a sandbox area for testing and exploration; or offer an “ask-an-expert” forum. While all the authors do an excellent job describing a wide-variety of tools, being able to play and explore is integral in overcoming reluctance to try new tools.

I am excited to see what SAA has to offer for its future “Trends in Archival Practice” publishing endeavors. This book is a great start.

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