

# Interview

## med Tom Nesmith

### Elisabeth Bloch

*I forbindelse med konferencen "Community as Archives, Archives as Community" i Winnipeg den 13.-15. juni 2013 interviewede Elisabeth Bloch, Københavns Stadsarkiv, Tom Nesmith om hans syn på aktuelle arkivspørgsmål.*

1. *What is your view of the purpose of archives?*

There are clearly many different types of archives with many types of mandates and actual uses. I think that regardless of their variety they can have a shared "purpose", which is to maximize the benefits of archives to society. For entirely understandable reasons, some will be closer at the moment to that ideal than others. I believe that all should be working toward it. The opportunities today to do so are unprecedented. The need to do so has never been as urgent. The uses of archives have exploded in number and variety in recent decades – in academic history, the social sciences, popular historical writing, and genealogy, as well as in new scientific, medical, ecological, social justice, literary and artistic, and news media uses. Archives have a profound socio-economic and intellectual impact, but, since few realize that, archives lack widespread public appreciation and support. As a result, they remain vulnerable to budget cuts and curtailments of their authority. One major consequence of this socio-political weakness is their general inability across the world to archive born-digital records. We are at a crossroads in the history of archives, and whether we will have archives in the digital age like those

we have enjoyed in the analogue age is an open question. The sponsors of archives so far have been largely indifferent to the digital challenge. Without much more societal pressure on them to support digital archiving, I am not sure that archives as we know them will include the digital record. Fortunately, given the astounding expansion of society's uses of archives, archivists are much better placed than ever before to address this problem. It is up to them, though, to do so by engaging the issue much more actively than they ever have.

2. *In an article from 2002 you write about what you call the central archival myth: "enormous power and discretion over societal memory, deeply masked behind a public image of self-effacement". Would you please explain what you mean?*

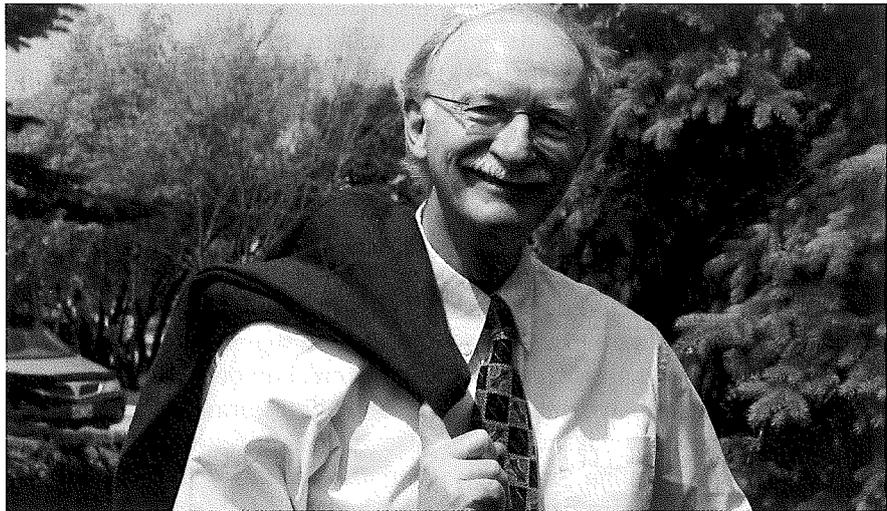
Archives exercise great influence over the selection, description, and availability of records that shape our understanding of the past. Their particular formal mandates, ways in which they implement ideas about archives, such as provenance, and actions they take, such as appraisal, description, and public programming, mediate the information records contain about the past to their present users. The very fact that some records are deemed archival and merit long-term retention gives them a new power to shape knowledge and society in certain ways. Until recently archivists have seldom acknowledged this power and rarely explored it. Indeed, they have often stressed how little they do, and should do, to intervene in processes that shape the formation of societal knowledge or memory. This is the idea behind the

traditional fundamental principles of archival work – that archives convey unchanged a record from the past to the present and future. This is the self-effacement at the heart of much archival thought. Archiving, however, inevitably changes the records through, among other means, their recontextualization and reinterpretation by archivists as *archival* and *records of this or that* phenomenon, as well as by the contextualizations done by other users. What the records *are* therefore changes in this ongoing process. I suggest that archives must change the records in order to 'preserve' them. This may be driven home most apparently and decisively by the preservation challenges of digital records. They will not only constantly evolve in this intellectual sense, but also physically as they are migrated to new accessible formats. If archival records are not changed or reinterpreted in ways relevant to contemporary society's central concerns and needs, archives will continue to suffer underfunding and socio-political weakness, which, in turn, will undermine the care or preservation of the record. Is this not the principal reason why archives have not been able to 'preserve' the digital record? Few in society have *interpreted* it as *archival*. The digital era will require the end of this self-effacement, or indeed, archives as we have known them may well be effaced.

3. *Opponents of this way of thinking would claim that archives and archivists should not concern themselves with the use of the archive or the outcome of the use of the archives but leave that to researchers and other users of archives. Why, in your mind, is that not a valid point?*

This is not a convincing position in my view. Although the variety of uses of archives has grown significantly, no archive is being used as fully as it might be. Not all potential users of archives are aware of their value to them. And archival researchers may well only see clearly their portion of the whole range of uses of archives and the overall rationale for archives. Archivists are in the best position to see the whole and help build the broad-based coalitions of users that might bring sufficient societal pressure to bear on sponsors of archives to fund them adequately. This presents an ethical aspect to the question. If archives are not being used sufficiently to enable them to fulfill their mandates, and archivists know about likely new uses, how can passivity be justified? How could archivists justify this inactivity if they knew they could save their sponsors money or embarrassment, help save lives through scientific, environmental, and medical research, assist social justice, advance human knowledge and well being, and better protect the archival record? Or, perhaps worse, how could archivists justify being ignorant of such uses on the grounds that they are no affair of theirs? Is it truly the case that if asked to explain the importance and impact of archives on one's sponsoring institution and wider society, a self-respecting archivist would have nothing to say, out of either ignorance or indifference, and at best refer the inquirer to the researchers? Is there any other profession of consequence that would do that? Archivists have an extraordinary new message to tell their sponsors and societies about the importance of their work. Why stay silent in that traditional self-effacement?

It seems strange to me that in a time when institutions of all kinds must work hard to justify their existence and earn public engagement with them that some archivists would not feel much need to do so much more aggressively. Even if the purposes of archives were well understood, that would not be excusable,



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as no successful institution or human activity can rest long on yesterday's results.

4. *One of the key concepts of modern day archives seems to be "community". The title of the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists is "Archives as Community – Community as Archives". Could you explain this idea of community and its relevance to archives and archivists?*

I think this idea means many different things to many people. I would like to think of it this way: archivists, acting as a professional community, seek to support the involvement in archiving of the widest range of people in the various civic communities archives serve. That means many things. It means trying to ensure that appraisal decisions and other archival functions are done with the needs and interests of the community uppermost. This means, again, that archivists ultimately serve societal purposes. For example, when records of certain minorities are created by a state or corporation, they too should be included in the archive, and that collecting archives should include the records of the variety of community members in their acquisition decisions. This can also mean that members of these communities should have some input into such archiving decisions. How, for example, might state archives engage indigenous communi-

ties in re-description of records that the state created to document them? The New South Wales state archives in Australia recently conducted the *In Living Memory* project to do just that. Aboriginal people shared information about people, places, and events that re-contextualized the records from their perspective. In effect, they helped re-create the records in the manner I mentioned above. This adds new meanings and usefulness to them. This might engage society in archival work in ways that build that needed societal support for archives. How that community involvement is to be done remains to be explored more fully, but it has always been done. Archives have always reflected the influence of certain members of their communities – often social elites and their political and administrative allies. Are our conventional finding aids 'co-authored' in a sense already by such 'invisible' community processes, which we have simply naturalized as the way things should be done?

Community archiving also means to me that the community of archivists should be available to help establish and support archives created by communities of various kinds – whether of the more conventional type by towns or villages, or by social groups, such as gay and lesbian communities, or cultural minorities.

5. *If you buy into this perspective,*

*what happens to the more traditional elements of archiving appraisal, arrangement, preservation, reference and public programming etc.?*

I think a societal or community perspective would animate these activities. They would be opened more to community input and needs, which I think would shape them in two general ways. One would be to deepen our commitment to a provenance-context-based approach to appraisal (as through macroappraisal) and arrangement and description (through the Australian-inspired series system, for example). This approach attempts to acquire and make accessible the fullest reflection of the history of records creators and their records in context. This would provide a broad body of records that would be most likely to support best the needs of the widest range of users, or communities. As archivists well know, using this contextual information enables them to field almost any type of inquiry, even if entirely new and unfamiliar to them, and to begin to locate records related to it. At the same time, however, if archives are to be more widely accessible to various new users and communities, whose members may have seldom used archives and find such provenance-based contextual systems hard to navigate, this foundation for archival access should have wrapped around it as much user-friendly guidance as possible concerning the characteristics and value of such contextual information to researchers, and to records related to certain popular research subjects or themes. Digital technologies help make this possible and (ever increasing) online access to digital records requires the contextual information about records that was once imparted at an archives, often orally by an archivist.

6. *"What's history got to do with it?" is the title of one of your articles from 2004. What does history have to do with it? What is the character of historical knowledge in the postmodern era, and what is the place of historical knowledge in archival work?*

Historical knowledge plays a central role in archival work in my view. It is focused on the history of records and archiving, or that provenance-based contextual knowledge of how the records were created and came down to us in our archival reading rooms. This is an expanded understanding of the conventional view of provenance, which has typically focused on the initial act of inscription or creation of the records as the records' "provenance", rather than also including much of the subsequent fuller history of the records. This wider view, for me, arose from my reading of literary theory that was inspired by postmodernist ideas. One does not have to declare oneself a 'postmodernist' in order to take this view of provenance. It simply is for me how I came to see archives very differently. But I think one can see archives in this new way without having to adopt a label of one kind or another. Ideas matter more than labels. If the ideas makes sense we should not be put off by a label they may have associated with them. Indeed, give them a new and better name! The key insight that I took away from this reading is that means of communication shape our understanding. This insight was not new, but it was strongly re-emphasized in postmodernist thinking. It is obvious that archival records and archiving actions themselves are means of communicating (or mediating) the past to the present and future. Our understandings are the products of these communication processes or histories of records making, archiving, and uses of archives. Thus to understand as best we can what records are communicating, we need to examine their histories, and when we do that we can see that there are many varied contexts over time that enable us to come to that understanding. We will probably never exhaust our understanding of those contexts and come to a final or definitive meaning of the records. But we can still know much. Indeed, I suggest we can know much more than a narrower understanding of provenance permits. The wider

view of provenance -- as the history of records, including their archiving histories -- means that there are many more ways to understand them, and thus many more possible uses of them. This is good news for archives as they try to maximize their benefits to their sponsors and society through enabling as many new uses as possible.

The heart of historical knowledge in archival work is thus this understanding of the history of records and archives, or knowledge of the history of institutions, their functions, structures, organizational cultures, recordkeeping systems, record making processes, main types of individual records and the categories of information they contain, their media and material or technological characteristics, custodial histories, and archival actions taken with them, including uses made of them there. And most of these features of records also apply to personal archives.

To do this history of records well, an archivist will also need to have a good grasp of the history of the society in which the records were created and the archives is located because records and archiving are best understood in that historical societal context, as products of it. In other words, archival records have a societal provenance. In my view, this historical contextual information can drive all aspects of archival work. It is not all that archivists need to know, as there are significant bodies of contemporary and technical information that are also needed, but it provides that information with the necessary historical perspective or purpose, and is the primary means of enabling archivists to appraise, arrange, describe, make available, preserve, and manage massive and always growing archives. For example, this enables archivists to construct the multiple-provenance contextual systems of arrangement and description supplemented by the user-friendly subject and thematic guide to certain records mentioned above. In my view, the history of society, history of records,

and history of archives work together in these ways to drive the work archives do.

7. *In an article from 2005 you quote British academic Chris Butler for saying that "Postmodernists are very good deconstructors, and terrible constructors", but you yourself have dedicated much attention to the reconstruction of archives in wake of postmodern theory. Could you give some examples of modern day practices that reflect this professional rebirth?*

Yes, I tried to show that Chris Butler was wrong by exploring the various ways in which a postmodern perspective might be useful in archival work. I think it is incumbent upon those who make such conceptual recommendations to follow through with more practical examples of how they might be implemented. Certainly my students would not let me off lightly if I did not! The most obvious impact of these ideas has been on the archival literature. The major archival journals are now brimming with articles influenced by it in one way or another. The literature has never been livelier, as archivists explore and debate new approaches to the study of records and archiving. The writings of archivists have also helped inspire and been inspired by a widespread parallel rethinking of the impact of records and archives on knowledge formation processes across a variety of other disciplines. Archivists who are thinking along these lines are part of a much wider intellectual phenomenon. Archival Studies need no longer be a marginal technical subject of limited intellectual scope and of interest only to professional archivists. It is emerging as a substantive field of study at universities with a major contribution to make to many other fields, while being illuminated by them in return.

These ideas are making their way to the workplaces of the authors and readers of this new archival literature in the archival profession and to the discussions they have with colleagues, sponsors, and users of archives. This emerging intellectual engagement can be seen in the in-

terdisciplinary essays commissioned by Library and Archives Canada and available at its web site on the implications for our understanding of archives of the ideas of pioneering Canadian communications theorists Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. If the "medium is the message" as McLuhan famously said, these essayists explore the "message" conveyed by the "medium" of archiving itself. I think we can also see the impact of such new ways of thinking about archives in appraisal work. Greater attention is now given at leading archives to explaining appraisal criteria and methods to archives' sponsors, users, and the general public. This recognizes the impact of such archiving actions on what we can know. In arrangement and description, there is more commitment to representing the multiple provenance of records, or to the fact that records have an important contextual history beyond their initial inscription or provenance. Perhaps the most ambitious such system outside of Australia is at the Archives of Manitoba. These ideas are now beginning to be felt in greater recognition of the archival history of records in descriptive standards such as ISAD G. In the comparatively new area of description of digitized documents, the Library of Congress, for example, explains at its web site the impact of this means of communicating its archival holdings on their appearance, organization, and thus possible meanings. Educational materials at various archives, such as Library and Archives Canada and the National Archives of the United Kingdom, include at their web sites extensive essays on the histories of media such as photography and maps or records such as wills so that researchers can learn more about how their changing characteristics enable them to understand information they convey. And in description, especially, there is more openness to the participation of community members and users of archives. The Australian *In Living Memory* project discussed above is an excellent example, and researcher

"tagging" projects in various archives reflect similar thinking. The growing use of podcasts, blogs, and other social media by archives to explain their services and invite discussion of issues they face also reflects this new conception of archival accountability and opening to public participation. That accountability is hardly needed if, in effect, archives do very little to be accountable for, but if they *do* shape knowledge and society in important ways, they can be expected to be held to a higher standard of accountability than ever before for the decisions they have made, and to welcome a wider range of perspectives on the contextualization of the records.

8. *Looking back from a long career in archival studies what would you point out as the most fruitful development and where – if at all – has the profession gone astray?*

The most fruitful development has been the enormous expansion and diversification of the uses of archives. An exciting transformation in the place of archives in our societies is underway. We have not done well at all, however, in telling our sponsors and society about it and the complex work archivists do to make this possible. Consequently, most people probably continue to think of archives as dusty and largely irrelevant places where old records go to die, and thus archivists have little to do.

9. *If you were to write a mission statement for archives today, what would it be?*

Archives ultimately exist to maximize their benefits to society.

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