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REVIEWS, CRITIQUES, AND ANNOTATIONS

REVIEW ESSAY

Archivists and the Use of Archival Records;
Or, A View from the World of Documentary Editing

Richard J. Cox

The past decade has been a time of new calls for reassessment of the archival reference function and analysis of the use of archival and historical records. Like bookends, we have on the one side a series of statements arguing for institutional studies of users and on the other calls for national approaches to the problem of understanding the use of America's documentary heritage.¹

Despite the strong calls, there has been little response to either side.\textsuperscript{2} Ann Gordon's study, also called the Historical Documents Study, for the National Historical Publications and Records Commission is a rare star in the constellation Challenge for the Profession, "American Archivist 50 (Winter 1987): 76-87; and Lawrence Dowler, "The Role of Use in Defining Archival Practice and Principles: A Research Agenda for the Availability and Use of Records," American Archivist 51 (Winter/Spring 1988): 74-86.

of archival user studies.\textsuperscript{3} It also shows the great need that the archival profession has for such studies, but not in the manner that the Gordon study intended. It is also a very different study than what archivists probably expected.

The genesis of the Gordon study was the "desire on the part of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission to learn more about the researchers who consult sources made available through projects it funds."\textsuperscript{4} Without question, this is a national user study with a closely defined purpose. Supposedly, because of the breadth of the commission’s support for both basic archival records and historical manuscript projects and documentary editions, the study of the use of the documentary heritage should be sufficient to benefit the American archival profession. The commission itself announced the study as being the most comprehensive analysis of historical researchers in two decades.\textsuperscript{5} But, as a closer examination of the study suggests, there should be sufficient doubt about just what the end purpose of the study was intended to be. For one thing, there are a number of competing purposes mentioned at other points in the study, such as

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\item \textsuperscript{4} \textit{Using}, 14.
\item \textsuperscript{5} "New Study of Research Finds Major Obstacles," \textit{Annotation 20} (March 1992): 6.
\end{itemize}
"by recognizing how thoroughly integrated into society are the uses of history, one can understand the social importance of the documents themselves." More important, however, it is what the study does not examine that is so telling about its real purposes.

What was the nature of the survey and the methodology employed? This study surveyed 2,225 people randomly selected from the membership lists of five historical and genealogical societies: National Genealogical Society, Organization of American Historians, American Society for Legal History, American Association for State and Local History, and the National Council on Public History. The purpose of selecting from these organizations was to "represent some of the known variety among researchers." The diversity of these associations supports providing such broad representation. A lengthy questionnaire of twenty-nine items was sent, seeking information on the nature of research, the kinds of sources consulted, how the resources were discovered, the manner in which access to the sources was achieved, and background data on the researcher and his or her training and experience. Of the 2,225 surveys sent, 1,394 individuals returned the questionnaires, quite an excellent return rate. While throughout the study there are references about how the different researchers use or approach historical records, it is also true that there are many occasions when the

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6 Using, 17.

7 Using, 17.
distinctions are not made. This problem undermines the value, at least at times, of surveying the very different research constituencies; but this, ultimately, is a minor criticism.

Who were the respondents? They were experienced researchers, one third noting they had done historical research for more than twenty years. There was an interesting mix: students represented eleven percent, avocational researchers made up forty-three percent, and occupational researchers accounted for forty-five percent. Half of the occupational researchers were university or college faculty. Ann Gordon, using the survey data, then tried to characterize each of the kinds of researchers. For example, education and training of these researchers, among many areas, were considered.

The study is well-structured in its presentation of conclusions and recommendations. After an executive summary and recommendations and general introduction, there are chapters on how historical research skills are used, how researchers discover their sources, how they get to the archival records and historical manuscripts, the nature of use made by historical researchers of archival finding aids, the role of microforms in this research, the role and use of documentary editions, and the message in all these findings for the commission. What is immediately noticeable about this brief summary of the report’s structure are some missing elements: Where is there a description of the archivist’s role in forming the documentary heritage through appraisal and preservation selection? What about the growing use of electronic networks for research and
increasing interest in the digitalization of traditional documents to support this use? What about differences between the use of electronic records and the documentary heritage in other media? Why are microforms and documentary editions singled out for special chapters? All these questions, and others, directly relate to the matter of the use of historical records.

Some of the answers to these questions rest in the purpose of the report to examine the commission's roles in the use of the documentary heritage. The commission has been, for example, the primary supporter of documentary editions in letterpress and microform for the past three decades. But some of this can also be chalked up to a very traditional, lopsided view of what archivists, manuscript curators, and historical researchers are doing and how they relate to each other. When there are references to other basic archival functions, they are misleading. For example: "Any researcher would shudder to hear archivists talk about appraising sources by standards of the use they currently receive because researchers know their own fickleness, their own selectivity, and the likelihood that they overlooked or omitted sources pertinent to their pursuit. The researcher and the record keeper will do best by planning together." But this statement seems to suggest that use is the main criterion for appraisal, and archival appraisal is more complex than this. Gordon's understanding of the archival profession seems flawed.

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⁸ Using, 54.
There are, however, many lucid aspects to the study. Gordon deftly characterizes parts of the relationship between the custodians and the users of the documentary heritage. She notes, for example, that "archivists fault the whole system of academic historical education for failing to prepare students for archival research," and then suggests that "by and large historians have ignored the criticism, and respondents to the survey seem to disagree with it." This part of the study demonstrates some of its value in debunking such long-held perceptions. This is seen in other ways. The survey results suggest that "archives and libraries serve already as places where people not only pursue research but also learn how. If researchers assert this in practice, the associated professions do not routinely acknowledge the fact." Another important view is that "researchers expect every library to function in some respects as a research institution regardless of scope and budgets." Given the development of online information systems, inter-library loan operations, electronic delivery of documents, and other developments, it is not surprising that this view has developed. But this is in contrast to such conclusions as "local historical societies . . . may serve well the needs for information on local topics but at the same time be isolated from the wider world of libraries and related


10 Using, 28.

11 Using, 36.
sources." This statement is absolutely true, yet it is especially problematic since these kinds of organizations hold a significant quantity of the nation's documentary heritage. One might ask just how this problem affects many of the other findings and conclusions in this study, but this is not completely developed in a forthright or logical fashion.

What are some of the other important points made by the study? "Researchers turn to the historical record not for the sake of using it but to answer questions. The distinction is an important one in defining the relationship between archivists and researchers. The former speak of archives as 'underused,' while researchers want solutions." While this kind of statement needs additional evidence and can be challenged, it is also true that it fundamentally paints some of the differences between archivists and users which archivists sometimes ignore or take for granted. Gordon also notes that the "Commission has set national standards for many aspects of work underlying and supporting the preservation and publication of sources, but it has not yet set standards for their dissemination." This is true, as well, with final reports of archival records and historical manuscripts projects that the commission has funded.

The study is characterized by many assumptions, some untested, some debatable, and others probably correct.

12 Using, 36.

13 Using, 45.

14 Using, 89.
But the preponderance of such assumptions make them worth noting. For example, we are told that "at no earlier time in its history have so many people sought historical information in and about the United States."\textsuperscript{15} Historic preservation, historic sites, history museums, genealogy, and the large number of graduate trained historians are all cited as evidence for this statement. But there is no specific proof offered for this. It is an assertion without evidence. In fact, we know that there has been earlier periods in which great interest has been expressed in the preservation and use of historical documents.\textsuperscript{16} Whether this is a dangerous assertion will be discussed later with other matters.

Another example of such assumptions is the statement that "the twenty-five years that separate Rundell's research [this is a reference to the 1970 publication of Walter Rundell, Jr., \textit{In Pursuit of American History: Research and Training in the United States} from the Historical Documents Study have seen renewed popularity of historical study in the adult population at large, new applications for historical research outside of academic departments in the public and private sectors that produce employment for many professionally trained practitioners, and recognition in the nation's archives

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Using}, 13.

\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, the recent analysis by Michael Kammen, \textit{Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).
that academic use constitutes only a part of their service.\textsuperscript{17} Again, one might ask what the evidence is for this statement. Public history, for example, remains firmly entrenched in the academy. Public historians strive to prove that their exhibit catalogs, consulting reports, and commissioned work are as worthy of consideration as the scholarly monographs of their university counterparts; in other words, they still must define their value in academic terms.\textsuperscript{18} There are, in addition, no measures that historical study is more or less popular. As for the recognition by archivists, this is not provable either. It is just as easy to assert that archivists prefer to have their academic colleagues as users rather than any other researchers. The lingering, tireless debate on the matter of graduate archival education suggests that archivists identify themselves as historians, which is another way of saying that the degree of recognition of changing use may at least be seen as undesirable, if it is truly evident to most archivists.\textsuperscript{19}

The assumptions about documentary editions are especially noteworthy. First, we have this statement: "With the start of a new era of documentary editing in the 1950s

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\textsuperscript{17} Using, p. 15.
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\textsuperscript{18} The quarterly journal, \textit{The Public Historian}, is full of such arguments, although there are certainly a wide range of views within the public history community about this.
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\textsuperscript{19} See, for example, the one dimensional arguments in Marilyn H. Pettit, "Archivist-Historians: An Endangered Species?" \textit{OAH Newsletter} 19 (November 1991): 8-9, 18.
\end{flushright}
came the grand promise that any household could have Jefferson and Franklin on its shelves. Inflated as the image may have been, the editions do bring documents of national importance within reach.\textsuperscript{20} This seems an especially loaded statement. While it makes a contrast between original design and actual results, this statement's meaning of "within reach" is unclear. Within reach by whom? Who are using these editions? What difference have they made in historical research or on larger public understanding of the past? Since there has been virtually no evaluation of the impact or importance of documentary editions (reviews of such volumes do not usually consider the larger issues, but most often treat the publications as the products of scholarly historians), these questions are even more crucial to an evaluation of the use of archival records and historical manuscripts. This area of the study leads us closer to its real purpose, a subject that will be considered later in this essay.

Beyond assumptions, there are even some contradictions that require further explanation. At one point, in discussing researchers getting to the sources, Gordon stated that "researchers can plan their time before they travel if archivists will make available copies of the best finding aids."\textsuperscript{21} But in her chapter on finding aids, Gordon chronicles the problems with the lack of use by researchers of these guides. As she states: "Historians do have a tradition of ambivalence about the usefulness of guides.

\textsuperscript{20} Using, 35.

\textsuperscript{21} Using, 42.
They also have their own customary practices of proven effectiveness, different systems rather than an antipathy to system.\footnote{22} How this problem fits with the earlier recommendation is not explained, a situation that occurs more than once throughout the study. There is, of course, also a question about what constitutes an effective finding aid. Gordon does not define this, but the professional archivist has with his or her emphasis on basic concepts such as provenance, context, and original order. Michel Duchein has stated that the "archival document . . . has . . . a raison d'etre only to the extent that it belongs to a whole." He goes on to note that "consequently, to appreciate a document, it is essential to know exactly where it was created, in the framework of what process, to what end, for whom, when and how it was received by the addressee, and how it came into our hands."\footnote{23} This is the rationale for an effective archival finding aid.

Even more perplexing is the description in this study of the obstacles put in front of researchers for using the documentary heritage:

In a sense the easiest obstacles to overcome are prohibitions against use because of the condition of the sources. About 30 percent of respondents had been barred from collections because repository staff had not

\footnote{22} Using, 59.

yet described or arranged the records, and another 20 percent or more had been barred because records were in poor physical condition. Although they do not come close to the obstacle posed by travel, these numbers are too high. They can be reduced with funds and staff time committed to description, arrangement, and preservation. No one’s interest conflicts with the goal of getting the sources into or back into use. It is necessary that the people who closed the records give priority to making them accessible and that they receive what support they need to do the job.24

The problem statement in this quotation is the one that suggests that more funds and staff can resolve this problem. This is not the problem. The problem is the lack of new strategies and approaches. Besides, resources will always be limited, requiring new strategies and approaches to be developed, tested, and refined, as David Bearman has convincingly argued in his brief study, Archival Methods.25 For someone to make such a suggestion in a study of this sort is to cause the entire work to be viewed with suspicion: for it is simply not the question of adequate funds and staff, it is how these funds and staff have always been used and should be used in the future.

There is also, at times, a remarkable display of ignorance about what is going on in the archival profession.

24 Using, 46.

Gordon comments on archival user studies in a peculiar way: "The survey data do not distinguish the intensity of each person's use. When archives examine their own users, they can discriminate between the person who posed a single question or sought a specific document and the person who spent weeks consulting an entire record group or reading through an entire life in personal papers. Those differences are critical to decisions about good reference service and systems of retrieval." On its face value, this is true, but the problem with this statement is that archivists have not embraced the notion of conducting very sophisticated institutional user studies. Those that have been done can be counted on one hand (and were cited above). Most archival repositories may count basic statistics, but there is little evidence that they are doing the analysis Gordon sees here as so important.

It is easy to find any number of other problems in understanding the archival community and its mission. For example, why is there no discussion of distinctions between use of institutional archives and the records located in historical records/manuscripts repositories? The differences are not a secret; in 1977, David Gracy in his basic primer on archival arrangement and description clearly stated the difference: "Archives are kept primarily to satisfy the needs of their creating organization. A manuscripts collection is accumulated to foster the study of the subjects about which

26 Using, 52.
the repository collects." Fredric Miller, in his more recent updated basic manual on arrangement and description, has emphasized this as well by noting that records in an archives have "inherent unity and structure" while those in a manuscripts repository lack structure and need more arrangement and description. There are clear implications for this, such as the fact that the kinds of researchers which Gordon describes and examines are not the intended beneficiary of the preservation of this portion of the documentary heritage.

In all this there is a decided prejudice evident, at least to me, in favor of documentary editions. This first appears in Gordon's chapter on microfilmed records, when she writes that

documentary editing superseded archival practice as the foundation for microfilmed projects. In the book editions sponsored by the agency, historians compiled sources by searching in many repositories and arranged them as the editor determined they would be most useful. As the costs of publishing large editions mounted, microform took on a new role as substitute medium for publication of editions modeled on the books. The microform editions are a compromise; they rarely incorporate the annotation expected in book editions,


and though their guides exceed the archival finding aid, they rarely achieve the standard of a book.\textsuperscript{29}

Part of this elicits a response of so what? Except, and this is a big except, the statement seems to be carefully worded to suggest that documentary editions are somehow the highest level of device for bringing documentary records to researchers.

The full chapter on documentary editions is even more revealing. While it is suggested that the marketing of these editions has not been as successful as hoped for and there are references to the fact that they have been criticized as not the ideal means by which to present historical records for their use, there is really little analysis of their use or merit of continuance. Gordon does suggest that sales figures are not a reliable mechanism by which to evaluate the documentary editions, but, then, what is? Furthermore, there is really little discussion about what the documentary editions actually represent. At one point Gordon notes that "people who use documentary editions rely on the scholarship of the editors to augment their own work."\textsuperscript{30}

This actually raises the question whether these works are more documentary sources than they are scholarly works, and this is an important distinction. Should we really fool ourselves into thinking that the large dollars invested in these editions are preserving documentary sources; if they

\textsuperscript{29} Using, 69.

\textsuperscript{30} Using, p. 83.
are, it is an infinitesimal portion of the documentary heritage. It is important here is to realize that Rundell's study of two decades asked precisely such questions about the nature and use of documentary editions. 31

Here it is worth an aside to consider an additional summary of this study by Gordon in the Association for Documentary Editing's own journal. In this essay Gordon focuses on her perception of documentary editions and their value, and, more importantly, her version of the debate between archivists and documentary editors. She states in this revealing essay that "within and around the Commission an argument about the relative merits of granting funds to archivists or editors simmered and occasionally boiled over." 32 Then she suggests that such things as the inability of researchers to get to the archival and historical manuscripts repositories "suggests new perspectives on a host of issues, including the importance of microfilm and of published documents which the researcher can bring close to home." 33 This leads to her re-statement of the larger study's finding that the National Historical Publications and Records Commission should "regain its position of

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leadership in the field of documentary editing."³⁴ At this point it should be obvious to all that Ann Gordon writes from the vantage of a documentary editor. Gordon laments the arguing between archivists and documentary editors over a "single, slim pot of federal money" and lambastes "critics within the Commission and their allies outside [who] have tried to redefine editing as an extension of archival management and practice."³⁵ Gordon then, in this brief essay, tries to show that editing is a superior manner in which to make primary source materials available to the researcher; for example, "scholars cannot match editors in their ability to travel in pursuit of sources on a topic."³⁶ Although she does suggest some serious questions that must be answered about documentary editions, it is also clear that the main purpose of the Historical Documents Study was to carve out a role and funding for documentary editing and not to evaluate objectively how researchers use historical records.

This perspective is misapplied when Gordon makes final recommendations to the commission in the fuller study. She presents a perspective that candidly suggests the commission has been too wedded to the archival profession:


Because the records program evolved as a partner in extending the professional development of archivists, many of its grants have a remote relationship with researchers and the public at large. They improve skills, support long-range planning, and address technical problems of preservation. When such projects publish results, the works are written for other archivists, not for users of the historical record or the public.\textsuperscript{37}

What is the point of this statement? It is almost contradictory to what follows on the next page:

Researchers are well served by work that improves their access to manuscript collections and records. Grants for the arrangement and description of collections and for finding aids should be made not only for exemplary collections and to prepare models of archival practice but also to make important collections more usable under current research demand.\textsuperscript{38}

So, we might ask, what should the commission really do? Gordon suggests, as she did in the ADE journal, that the "Historical Documents Study urges the Commission to reassert leadership not only through support for specific editions but also through national programs."\textsuperscript{39} Why the

\textsuperscript{37} Using, 89.

\textsuperscript{38} Using, 90.

\textsuperscript{39} Using, 90.
emphasis on documentary editions? Could it be that this study really was an excuse merely to urge continuation of the support for documentary editing? And, if so, why is this so bad?

There are many problems with arguing without clear support for what is being argued. Documentary editions are very labor intensive users of resources in order to preserve very infinitesimal portions of this heritage. Coincidentally, at about the time this study was released, a letter to the editor of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* about the Mark Twain documentary edition describes the problem with the way such projects have been managed. The commentator notes that an eleven word telegram receives a twenty-seven line explanation, causing the letter writer to suggest that at the rate that the project is proceeding it will "take 100 years to publish the full 60 volumes required to print them all" and about thirty-two million dollars in federal funding.\(^40\) Here, and many have noted such problems with documentary editions, we have a clear distinction between federally-sponsored scholarship and the need to make such sources readily available to the researcher. Moreover, the purpose to support these editions has overridden other important issues that should be included in such a study of historical records use. So, what have we learned? We have a better sense of the national use of historical records, but it is a knowledge that begs for more precise and serious institutional studies such

as Paul Conway has argued for in his milestone article. But what we have learned has been buried in a series of assumptions about the value of certain kinds of historical records such as documentary editions, along with some basic misassumptions about the basic work of the archivist.

Finally, should the archival community simply ignore this study? Despite some of my serious reservations about its purpose, *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage* should sound a call to archivists to study more seriously the dynamics of their research use that can be used to assist in the design of archival finding aids and especially the national, online systems that the archival profession is committed to developing. Such studies will better answer many of the kinds of questions raised by Gordon. Moreover, there are many illuminating findings about the use of historical records in this publication which archivists can draw upon for institutional reference operations. And, finally, this report should prompt archivists to understand more fully the purpose and nature of documentary editing.

Gordon seems to think archivists misunderstand documentary editing. In truth, most archivists have not seriously thought about documentary editing in one way or another. The slant of *Using the Nation's Documentary Heritage* in favor of documentary editing should cause the archival profession to re-open discussion about its role and funding. Despite my comments in this review, I am not against such work at all, but I believe it should be seen as scholarly historical work and not archival work or preservation. This means that large-scale federal or other
funding of multi-decade editorial projects should not be justified in the guise of making primary source materials more readily available; the cost is too high, the process is too slow, and the portion of the documentary heritage thus effected virtually infinitesimal. Documentary editing seems to be a nineteenth century approach to preserving the documentary heritage. As long as such editing is seen as a research activity (because it really is little different than what any careful historian does in using archival sources and preparing a research monograph), there is no problem with this activity. If funding used for its support diminishes what is available for the preservation and management of archival records and historical manuscripts, then archivists should be much more outspoken in their criticism and demand more serious accounting of how these editorial projects are used and administered. Looked at in this manner, the Gordon report has done us all a great service, giving us much to consider and debate for many years.

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