

# **Western Theories of Appraisal - From Europe to America to the Perspective of an International Society**

by

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The Canadian archivist and academic Terry Eastwood wrote in 1992:

"No theoretical question is more perplexing for the archivist than what should be the basis of appraisal or evaluation of archives. For all the thinking, there is as yet no generally accepted theory of appraisal that could inform methodology and practice."

It is indeed true that appraisal - or selection of archives - is one of the most controversial aspects of archives theory and practice. There are two opposite views about the very nature of an archives organisation. One view is that which says the role of the archivist begins at the time the agency that creates a record decides to transfer it to an archives. The other view states that it is a proper role for the archivist to participate actively in the selection process. Some who believe this say that this appraisal - this selection - is the single most important role of the archivist.

The purpose of my session today is not to give the definitive answer to the question of which is the best way to select archives, although I will be expressing some personal views. I want to present the arguments from both sides, accepting that there are strongly held opinions each way. This is not helped by the fact that different terms have different meanings around the world!

I want to mention various approaches to appraisal in Western archival theory and practice, including those in Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America.

But, an archivist always starts by looking at the past. I shall too, and given where we are sitting today, I shall begin with the past in Asia. One of the first recorded selection decisions was that of the first Qin Emperor of China, the man who united the country and began the construction of the Great

Wall in 213BC. The Emperor ordered all previous writings destroyed when he came to the throne, so all history would begin with him. This is a tradition that has continued at various times and in various places through history, including during the French Revolution in 1789, when the records of the government and the great noble families were destroyed because it was on their basis that taxes were paid! It is a method that continues to be reflected in other parts of the globe, including when the invading Iraqi army destroyed or took away much of the national archives of Kuwait, or in what was Yugoslavia, where military commanders deliberately bombed the archives and libraries of Bosnia as a way of destroying not just their resistance but their history and their memories, to quote Terry Cook.

All archival theory in the West has talked about 'importance', or 'value' or 'significance'. This theory argues that all appraisal strategy and actual appraisal and selection decisions can only come from one of three areas: the creator of the record, the current or future users of the records, or society at large.

In Europe, archival theory is based on the characteristics of archival documents. This states that these documents are by their nature all of equal value. The question of appraisal as giving value does not arise. European theory is based on the concept of Roman law. This held the principles of the relationship between archival documents and facts (the record is the fact) and the question of public faith (the people believe the records).

Archives institutions in Roman society were public offices; the public had access to the records in the archival institution. The records supported the rule of law and certain records developed a special value because of this. They were evidence. Certain other records had a lesser value because they were not required as evidence. Records that entered the archives were special and were kept secure.

These ideas became the basis of European thinking about archives and also the basis for European thinking about archival theory. Archives were automatically thought of as truthful, authentic, natural, interrelated and unique. This view helped the development of the ideas of provenance and original order.

The European view argues that giving different values to documents within an archives is in conflict with basic theory. All archives are impartial and authentic as evidence and tell the truth. The fact that they are unique in their context makes the collection whole. For an outsider to decide to keep some and not others would therefore influence the value of the whole.

Archives were viewed in such early thinking as the unconscious and thus natural byproducts of administrative or human activity. If they were continually maintained, without tampering and in unbroken or traceable custody, they could be considered reliable and authentic evidence of the actions of those who created them. Such an early theoretical focus on respecting the original order and the context of creation reflected those pioneering archivists' preoccupation with arranging and describing older records of uncertain origin. But such archival theory, which concerns the **nature** of records, is of no direct benefit to appraisal theory, which concerns the **value** of records, the reasons or principles why some records are judged to be important and some are not. Of course, if records are not authentic or reliable, do not have the characteristics of evidence, are not part of trustworthy recordkeeping regimes, their value is much diminished, perhaps destroyed, but that is true of **all**

records: the letter of a Prime Minister or President and the invoices ordering new stationery.

In European theory, the archivist is impartial. It is a view that was argued early in the 20th Century by the English archivist Sir Hilary Jenkinson, who strongly maintained that it was not the role of the archivist to destroy any document. To do so would be to impose the archivist's own personal judgment. Jenkinson argued that it was up to the office that created the record to decide what should be kept or destroyed.

In short, archivists must remain impartial. This point of principle existed in the UK for more than 30 years, and was the basis for the system set up by the Grigg Committee in London in 1954. This was the first serious review of the public records system in the United Kingdom since the Public Records Act of 1877. It was set up to look at the way the law was working in a time in the civil service when technology was impacting on recordkeeping (given the wide use of the typewriter and better ways of copying documents). It also took into account the amount of public records created during two world wars and the increase in the size of the civil service.

The 1877 law had established a system under which records should be scheduled for destruction, but it had been rarely used, and was beginning to break down under the pressure of modern records creation. The Grigg Committee's proposals for selection of records for permanent preservation were largely to do with setting up a new system, and not about appraisal theory.

It proposed:

- every department should appoint a departmental record officer responsible for the management of non-current records, in addition to the exiting registrars who were responsible for active records
- new procedures for the management of non-current records should be established. Records were to be divided into two main categories: files dealing with policy, administration, legal, financial and other general matters, and case files;
- that the first category of papers should be reviewed by departmental staff, five years after they had been closed. If the file was still of value to the department it was to be retained, on the principle that what was no longer of use to the department was unlikely to be of interest to potential future users;
- that files remaining should be reviewed 25 years after the file had been closed, now using the criterion of historical importance. Again, this review was to be carried out usually by departmental staff, often senior retired staff familiar with the period under review;
- that case files, which were the largest quantity of government files, should usually be scheduled for destruction as soon as they are no longer needed, which may be just a few months after they were finished with. In some instances samples of these files could be selected. For some series all files may be selected for permanent retention;
- in general records selected for permanent retention should be transferred to the Public Record Office before they were 30 years old.

This system was introduced in the British Civil Service and was generally in use until only a couple

of years ago. The Public Record Office provided government agencies with some guidance on what it considered of importance. It discussed this guidance with agencies and increasingly with members of public user groups and published such material for public comment.

This process of appraisal allows the destruction of many valuable records for any reason that the person or agency or government may decide. It is an approach which can lead to abuses of the system, undermining the value of the archives in showing how a company was managed or a country was governed. The powerful sections of society can be given many privileges if it is those people who determine what is kept to record what society did.

This approach can also confuse archival theory and appraisal theory. Archival theory sees the archivist preserving original order and context, not interfering with these things but keeping the archives as a group, and providing access to those records. Appraisal theory, on the other hand, is about making choices (the title of an Australian document I will talk about later). Appraisal theory accepts that someone has to intervene to decide what is kept and what is destroyed, because it is impractical to keep everything (especially as governments became more complex in the 20th Century).

Jenkinson and other traditional European archivists were uncomfortable with archivists undertaking this role of selection, because they did not understand the records well. Archivists were not supposed to make 'personal judgments' because they were supposed to be impartial, and the archives themselves had to be impartial too.

In the United States the situation was different. There was not the same history of the development of government administration and the role of an archives as in Europe and the United Kingdom. Government records that survived did so more by good luck than good management. The National Archives was established in 1934, and quickly gained the power to decide which records needed to be retained.

It was in the USA that the concept of records management was developed as different to but closely related to archival theory. The Archives law of 1934 gave the National Archivist an advisory role in disposal but in 1939 a Records Disposal law gave him power to authorise destruction when the Congress was not sitting.

The first set of appraisal criteria were published in 1940 by an officer of the National Archives, P C Brooks. This allowed government offices to dispose of copies, but also listed three criteria for assessing value:

1. The value of the records to the agency that created them;
2. The use of the records for administrative history;
3. The value of the records for historical research.

The first - value to the agency - is about their value to the ongoing functions of the agency. The second is about the possible needs of future administrators for precedents as well as the possible interest of those studying the way the government's or the agency's functions were carried out. As

well, the needs of the archivist in documenting the history of government were noted. The third criterion was much less specific, and related not just to individual and important documents, but also to broader values for historical research. Brooks said at the time that most historical records "possess such value not as individual documents but as groups of documents that, considered altogether, reflect the activities of some organisation or person or portray everyday rather than unique events and conditions".

Brooks said that it was important for the archivist to work with the officers in the government agency, and to take an interest in the documents from the time of their creation, and to work with agency staff to develop filing schedules that would help the agency, the archivist and then the user of the archives. He said there should be regular destruction of records no longer needed for agency or archival use, as well as planned transfers to the archives.

These suggestions by the National Archives started a debate in America about what should be retained and what destroyed. Another government records manager suggested (perhaps so explicitly for the first time) that cost should also be considered when deciding how much might be kept. He suggested also that there were four reasons for keeping records:

- Official reference by government agencies;
- Protection of citizens' private rights
- Serious research by scholars
- Assistance with family history and other community interests.

The first two reasons were said to justify higher public expenditure than the last two. It also proposed three reasons by which to judge the potential usefulness of records:

- the amount and character of the information in the records,
- the convenience of the arrangement of the records,
- and the comprehensiveness of the records.

Another archivist said that these arguments seemed to say that 'the business of keeping records should be viewed in a purely commercial light and that it should play precisely the same role in our lives as the purchase of a pair of shoes'. This archivist argued that "We keep archives because we are civilised men and therefore must do so" and did not agree with the cost of keeping records being a reason not to keep them. He argued that it was not correct to say that developing a rigid set of appraisal criteria, principles and formulas would make all appraisers far more efficient because they would be able to evaluate all records in the same way. He argued that such rigid criteria would do away with experimentation and independent thought, something all archivists needed.

These early American ideas were radically reinterpreted by Theodore Schellenberg in 1956. His approach sought to broaden Jenkinson's view from that only of the institution, to include the needs of a much wider range of researchers. If a researcher can use the record, then it has value. If it is hard to imagine or anticipate use, or to justify the expense of keeping the record, then the record does not have use. He wrote:

"It is quite obvious that modern archives are kept for the use of others than those who created them, and that conscious decisions must be made as to their value for ... research use. Records kept by government for the accomplishment of its own work are not necessarily archives.... To be archives, materials must be preserved for reasons other than those for which they were created or accumulated. These reasons may be both official and cultural ones."

Schellenberg suggested that the way records were kept would have a significant effect on the assessment of record values and the ease with which valuable records could be selected for permanent retention in archival institutions. Thus he proposed that archivists should involve themselves more closely in the work of records managers in devising more effective systems of recordkeeping, that agency officials should have the main role in deciding primary value (that is, value to government and the agency itself), but that archivists should have primary responsibility for deciding secondary values (that is, value for research).

Jenkinson in the United Kingdom did not fully support this approach to primary and secondary value, which was a compromise between archives as evidence and archives for wider use. However, Schellenberg's approach was widely adopted in the United States and became influential in much of the English-speaking world, including Canada and Australia.

This broad user-based approach to deciding value was an important step forward, but it still left the archives institution subject to influence by a small group or groups of users, or the latest trend in historical research from graduate schools which leads to pressure for archivists to collect records relevant to historical research. Any archivist trained in history or closely related social sciences in their undergraduate degrees are unlikely to judge uses based on the needs of physical sciences, medical, environmental or other criteria.

In 1974, Gerald Ham, the President of the Society of American Archivists attempted to redefine such user based views. He asked:

"Is there any field of information gathering that has such a broad mandate with a selection process so random, so fragmented, so uncoordinated and even so often accidental?" resulting in "archival holdings that too often reflect only narrow research interests rather than the broad spectrum of human experience."

Archivists concerned too with the way that electronic records were being created and destroyed without ever being appraised also began to question this user-based valuing of records. By concentrating on the end product, in the shape of old, paper records, rather than on the purposes and systems by which the records were being created, this approach also tended to bring the archivist into contact only with records managers rather than with those who actually create the record and interpret the decisions they are recording.

The concerns being expressed by these later American theorists began to reflect the views of certain German and Dutch archivists, who argued that there was a higher level to consider before one looked

at the records themselves.

In 1991 Dutch archivist Hans Booms argued that:

"My basic premise ... is that in building the documentary heritage of society, archivists must first establish the value of the records before they can decide what to keep and what to destroy. One thing is clear, at least since the beginning of the [20th] century, that archivists cannot keep everything."

This theory of appraisal is founded on working out directly the values, ideas and trends in the society creating the records, and turning these into ways of appraising the records themselves. This theory places society, instead of the records, at the centre of any theory of appraisal. It changes the values of the agencies that actually creates the records to a value put on social processes.

Instead of the model proposed by the American Schellenberg with its primary (agency and government) and secondary (researcher) use of the records, this theory looks at the most important structures in society as well as the functions and processes that create records. These put together represent the spread of human experience in society, and it is this which should be documented. This theory was described as 'macro-appraisal'.

Any such macro level model of appraisal attempts to describe those functions and activities which are likely to produce records of high archival value before the resulting records are actually appraised using more traditional criteria. The assumption here is that with very few exceptions, values are not only found in the records but also in theories of what is of significance in today's society which archivists also need to bring to their assessment of records.

The functions and structure of an agency together form the reasons why the agency documents things. The records-creating agency undertakes sub-functions and establishes a number of sub-structures to carry out the functions they are tasked with doing. These require information systems to organise and supply the documentation needed to carry out the functions. Through these systems are created the records that records managers and archivists will eventually appraise. Priority is therefore given to the creator, and not to the record itself. The provenance of the record is based in the act of creating it rather than the physical record itself.

To do this, records creators, guided by archivists and records managers, need to ask such questions as:

- Why were these records created in the first place? It does not involve asking what the records contain.
- How were the records created and used by the original users? It does not involve asking how they might be used by future users.
- What functions and authority of the records creator do the records support? It does not involve asking what internal structure and physical factors the records have.
- What should be documented about what happened? It does not involve asking what

- documentation should be kept.
- Which records creating agencies are important?

This is a structure put forward by the Canadian archivist Terry Cook in many of his arguments about macro-appraisal. It has influenced much later thinking about appraisal theory and practice in Western countries, not least in Australia. It has also strongly influenced the development of the Australian Standard on Records Management, and now the International Standard.

What I want to do now is show how the recent changes in the National Archives of Australia and selection policies reflect changes in international trends.

We have identified five objectives which appraisers must take into account when considering whether records should be regarded as national archives. Records selected as national archives should contribute to meeting one or more of these objectives. The objectives apply to records in any format.

In setting the objectives, we acknowledge a community view that government records may have value or significance in a variety of contexts, and that we should not pursue narrow selection policies. Accordingly, we will maintain our position that records may be selected as national archives because of their administrative or functional significance or because they are significant or useful in other contexts. However, the scope of our statutory role requires that our foremost consideration be the relevance of records to documenting government activity.

## **Objectives**

The records identified under the objectives, together, should provide an adequate account of the activities concerned, the authority under which they were carried out by the government and government institutions, how implementation was effected, who was involved and affected, and the nature and extent of the outcomes. The first four objectives relate to functional context: governing Australia and its people. The fifth objective takes in records which may have significance in other contexts.

### **Our first objective is:**

*To preserve concise evidence of the deliberations, decisions and actions of the Government and its agencies relating to key functions and programs and significant issues faced in governing Australia.*

In relation to this objective we will concentrate on records that provide the best evidence of decisions and activities that relate to issues affecting the nation as a whole. The records selected will include those that document the background to, basis for and outcomes of those decisions and activities.

The significance of functions, programs, issues and associated decisions and actions will be assessed in relation to:

- how critical they are, or were, in the administration of the government or its agencies; and
- their actual or potential influence or impact (whether positive or negative) on Australian and world



affairs.

Assessments of significance will be imputed to the relevant records. Where the functions and activities of government agencies regularly intersect with high profile or significant issues, all records generated in the undertaking of the function may be retained.

**Our second objective is:**

*To preserve evidence of the source of authority, foundation and machinery of the government and its agencies.*

We will focus on records that underpin the structure and functioning of the Government and its agencies and define the nature and extent of their jurisdictions, obligations and powers.

**Our third objective is:**

*To preserve records containing information that is considered essential for the protection and future well-being of Australians and their environment.*

We would expect such records to comprise unique, irreplaceable information that is needed by national governments now and, probably, in perpetuity for effective planning, decision-making and transfer of knowledge in matters such as health and safety, security, social cohesion and environmental management. The capacity of records to be used for these purposes should be clearly evident.

**Our fourth objective is:**

*To preserve records that have a special capacity to illustrate the condition and status of Australia and its people, the impact of government activities on them, and the interaction of people with the government.*

This objective will focus on records that exemplify or characterise the implementation and impact of major government functions and programs. These records may embrace both routine and exceptional cases, including personal case records. Complete runs of case records may be preserved where it is evident that the government functions and programs to which they relate were, or are, of great significance in the government or development of Australia, or to the community.

**Our fifth objective is:**

*To preserve records that have substantial capacity to enrich knowledge and understanding of aspects of Australia's history, society, culture and people.*

Although government records arise from and document government activity, their significance may lie in contexts other than their functional context. For example, a record documenting the routine

approval of a construction project may concern a building that is later renowned for its architectural significance. The significance of the record, here, largely derives from its associations outside and beyond government.

We will take into account assessments by appraisers and stakeholders as to the significance that records may have because of their association with events, phenomena, persons, places or themes. Beyond functional context, we will select as national archives only those records that we are convinced have the highest levels of historical, social, aesthetic, scientific, research or technical significance. Preference will be given to records that can provide a broad community benefit.

In addition, some types of records may be kept because the Australian community holds them, or the information they contain, in high esteem. This may be evident, for example, from continuing high usage rates or by the community expressing its concerns to the responsible authorities.

### **Recordkeeping issues**

There are several recordkeeping issues, some of them of a technical nature, which may also affect the Archives' decisions concerning preservation and disposal of records. If records have serious technical defects, such as being unreliable, incomplete or inaccessible, we may decide to destroy them.

Other factors being equal, we will give preservation priority to records that are technically good records; that is, they are complete, reliable, authentic and accessible. The existence of adequate information about the organisational, functional and recordkeeping contexts of records will be an important consideration. Evidence of recordkeeping strategies that comply with the International records management standard and meet the requirements of full and accurate records will also be a factor. The areas that we will assess include:

- provenance/authenticity - whether records are what they are supposed to be;
- integrity and completeness - whether records have been securely maintained to prevent deliberate or accidental unauthorised access, alteration or removal, and whether they have context and structure as well as content;
- accessibility and usability;
- preservation feasibility - whether it is technically possible to prevent or control unwanted alteration or deterioration;
- recordkeeping relationships and dependencies - for example, where records depend on the existence of other records or materials to render them accessible and meaningful; and
- maintenance risks (including costs).

We will be using these criteria and the five selection objectives to guide appraisal decision-making. This will be within the framework of the appraisal model suggested by the international standard, so all records should be maintained for as long as they are required to meet business needs, accountability requirements and community expectations, even if they are not selected as national archives.

To summarise the three approaches to appraisal and selection:

The first appraisal theory model allows the creator to determine "value" and therefore to make the archival appraisal decision. This was the approach advocated by Sir Hilary Jenkinson, and it is an approach that still finds some advocates. This approach has the advantage of allowing those closest to the records, and to the functions and activities that generated them, to isolate the best records reflecting those activities, to undertake a natural reduction of the bulk of records over time so that only the essential core or bare minimum remains. The assumption is that the original actors in the events and issues are best qualified to do this selection because they know the issues. Thus, a natural residue will emerge, which in the fullness of time, the archivist will take into custody and preserve forever. This approach assumes, however, that creating institutions are relatively stable, small in scale, and straight-forward in their functions and activities, that actions and events are institution-specific and narrowly and cleanly focused within a traditional vertical bureaucracy, and that these characteristics -- small, stable, focused, and centralized -- are also reflected in the institution's recording technologies and recordkeeping systems and in its staff and staffing structures. The trouble began when increasingly, none of these conditions continued to exist in the vast majority of late twentieth-century institutional record creators in Western societies.

The second approach to appraisal theory is to allow user needs (actual or anticipated) to determine value. Best argued by Theodore Schellenberg and his American successors, and holding sway over most of the archival world in the second half of the twentieth century, at least until very recently, this second approach sought to broaden the institutional bias of Jenkinson by considering the needs of a much wider range of researchers. It is a very broad approach to determining value; if a researcher can use the record, then it has value. If it is hard to imagine or anticipate or, increasingly in resource-hard times, demonstrate use, then the record does not have value. Schellenberg listed various categories of use: primary and secondary uses, and within the latter category, evidential, legal, financial, and especially informational research values. Certainly consistent with his focus on society and secondary research, Schellenberg to his credit attempted much more than had Jenkinson, the Dutch, or other European authors to build bridges between archivists and librarians, and between archivists caring for institutional records and those responsible for private manuscripts. If the researchers found uses for records, then it can be assumed that the records must fill needs that society felt, and, again, Schellenberg's privileged historians would in their work indirectly reflect as well trends in society.

The third theoretical basis for appraisal is based on directly deciding the values and trends that existed at the time of the records' creation, and translating these into appraisal strategies and methodologies. Inevitably, all societies (including the archivists residing in them) give greater or lesser value to the way a society is structured and functions, and how individual citizens or groups of citizens interact with that society. Such values given to particular functions in society will in turn determine which related records are declared to be archival or which are not. The appraisal theory that archivists such as Terry Cook and certain Australians advocate argues that such values in society may be determined by the archivist by specifying the functions, programs and activities that are undertaken in that society; and clients, customers, citizens, or groups who are affected by both the functions and structures. Archival appraisal theory in this third option explores the nature of

these agents and acts, and the interconnections or interrelationships between them, and assigns greater importance, or "value" to certain functional-structural factors as compared to others. This is why it is known as "functional appraisal." As the Dutch archivist Hans Booms noted, because the functional context of creation and contemporary use establishes value, it is a provenance-based approach to appraisal. Because it looks first at functions rather than records, it has been called a "top down" approach. Because appraisal has traditionally been about deciding the value of records, this approach, which decides first the value of functions, has been called "macro-appraisal."

Appraisal, or determining value, has been a relatively recent inclusion in archival practice. Record keepers have been selecting archives over other records ever since archives were first created. The establishment of public national archives in the West after the French Revolution led to a separation between recordkeepers in the administration of government and archivists in national archives. In the beginning archivists were happy to receive records selected by the administration, seeing their role purely in a custodial light as being preservation, arrangement and description of records and providing access to these records. To enable them to do this these archivists developed a body of theory based on the natural characteristics of records summed up in the principles of provenance and original order. As time progressed, and as administration became far more complex and many more records (and archives) were created, some archivists sought to gain greater control over the selection process. Where they were successful in doing so, they needed to show that they had the necessary theory and experience to carry out this new and enhanced role. This role to some seemed to be in opposition to traditional archival theory, as well as relieving the administration of some part at least of its traditional responsibility for the permanent records.

Increasingly selection of archives has been subject to the broader trends in Western society that have seen the serious questioning of the power, privilege and influence held by any one group, such as historical researchers. Decisions are meant to be made to reflect the broader and more equitable interests of society as a whole. Archivists increasingly see their role as to reflect what happened in society at any one time. They do not see their role as trying to provide for future historians material that may be of value just to those researchers. One generation can never anticipate what future generations will want from the records. It used to be that most research was done about how government operated and what they did. In the last 30 years or so the trend in Western society has been research into how government decisions impacted on people in general, "the man and woman in the street" as they are described. Not surprisingly there is little evidence in the archives about that, because those making the appraisal and selection decisions were making decisions based on what they themselves had studied, which were the big events such as wars and revolutions and famines and disasters, with some changes to society's approach to how it managed itself. There are lots of records about these things that still lie unread in most Western archives.

In 1988 South African archivist Pam Wernich wrote that archivists do nothing less than "moulding the future of documentary heritage". Archivists determine "which elements of social life are imparted to future generations..." and "the selection of records for preservation from the vast quagmire of official documentation represents the greatest professional challenge and the most important area of archival activity."

My friend Terry Cook, who has done much to influence my own view about archives, wrote in 1999:

"As a profession, we archivists need to realise the continual gravity of this task [of appraisal and selection]. We are literally creating archives. We are deciding what is remembered and what is forgotten, who in society is visible and who remains invisible, who has a voice and who does not."

What many archivists are saying now is that we cannot anticipate future research; we know we will always get that wrong. All we can pretend to do is to tell future generations what we today thought was important in our society. Archivists therefore need to become comfortable in working with others to analyse the relationship between the creators of the records, the functions, programs and activities they undertake and the impact of those functions, programs and activities on society in general.

Thank you.